

KODANSHA

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オトリモノ ガタリ

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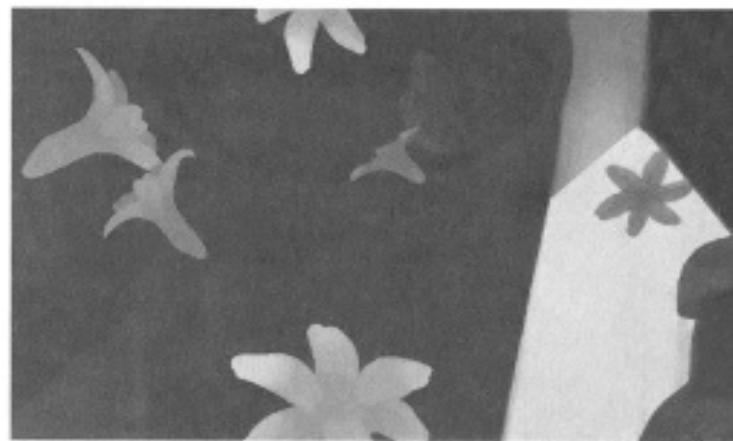
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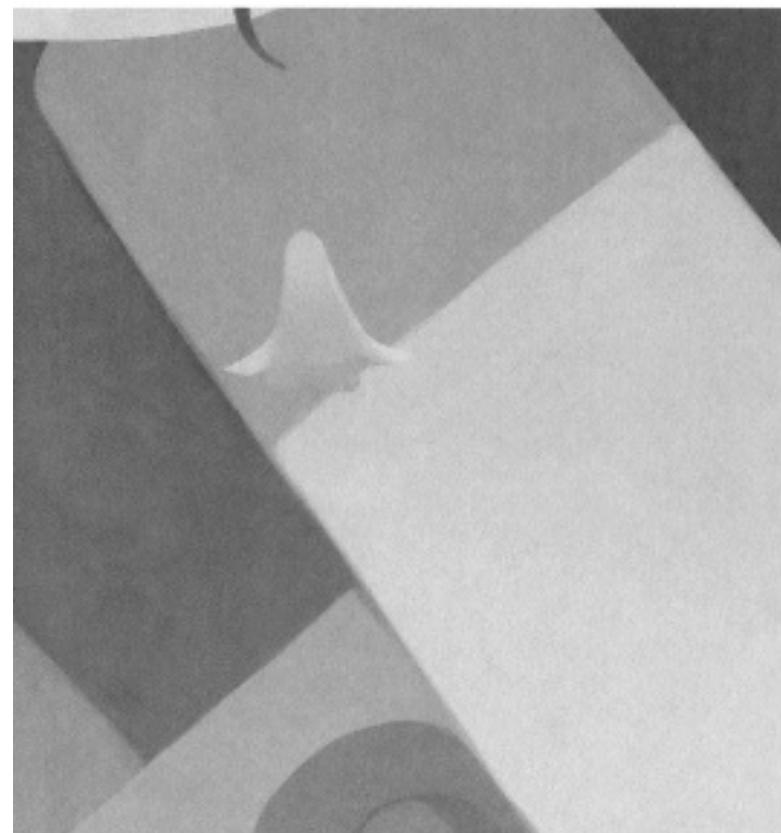
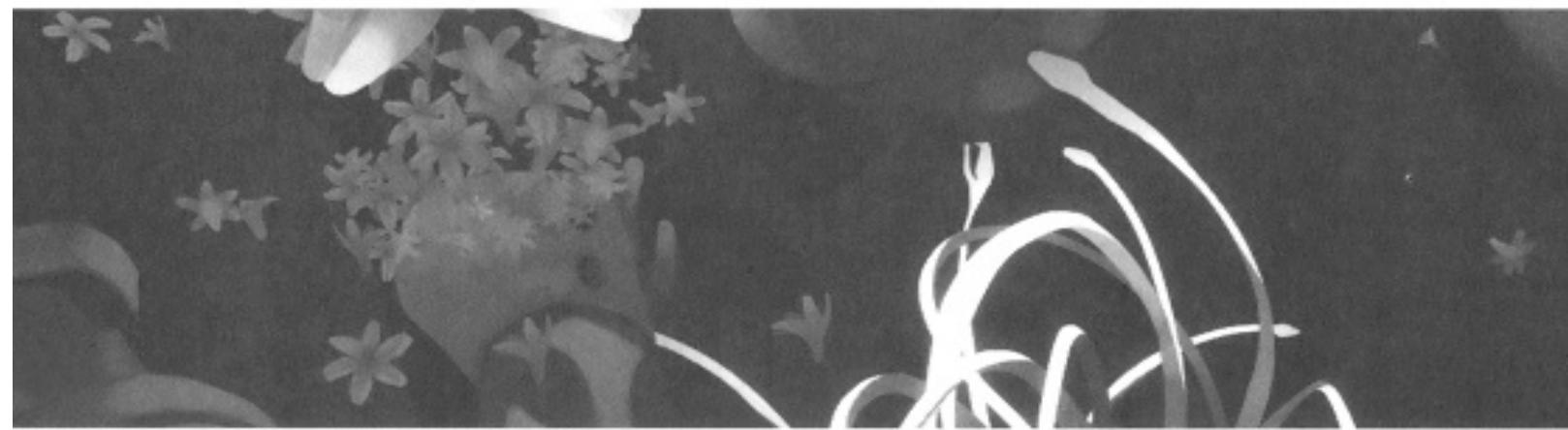
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第乱話

*Nadeko Medusa*  
なでこメドウーサ



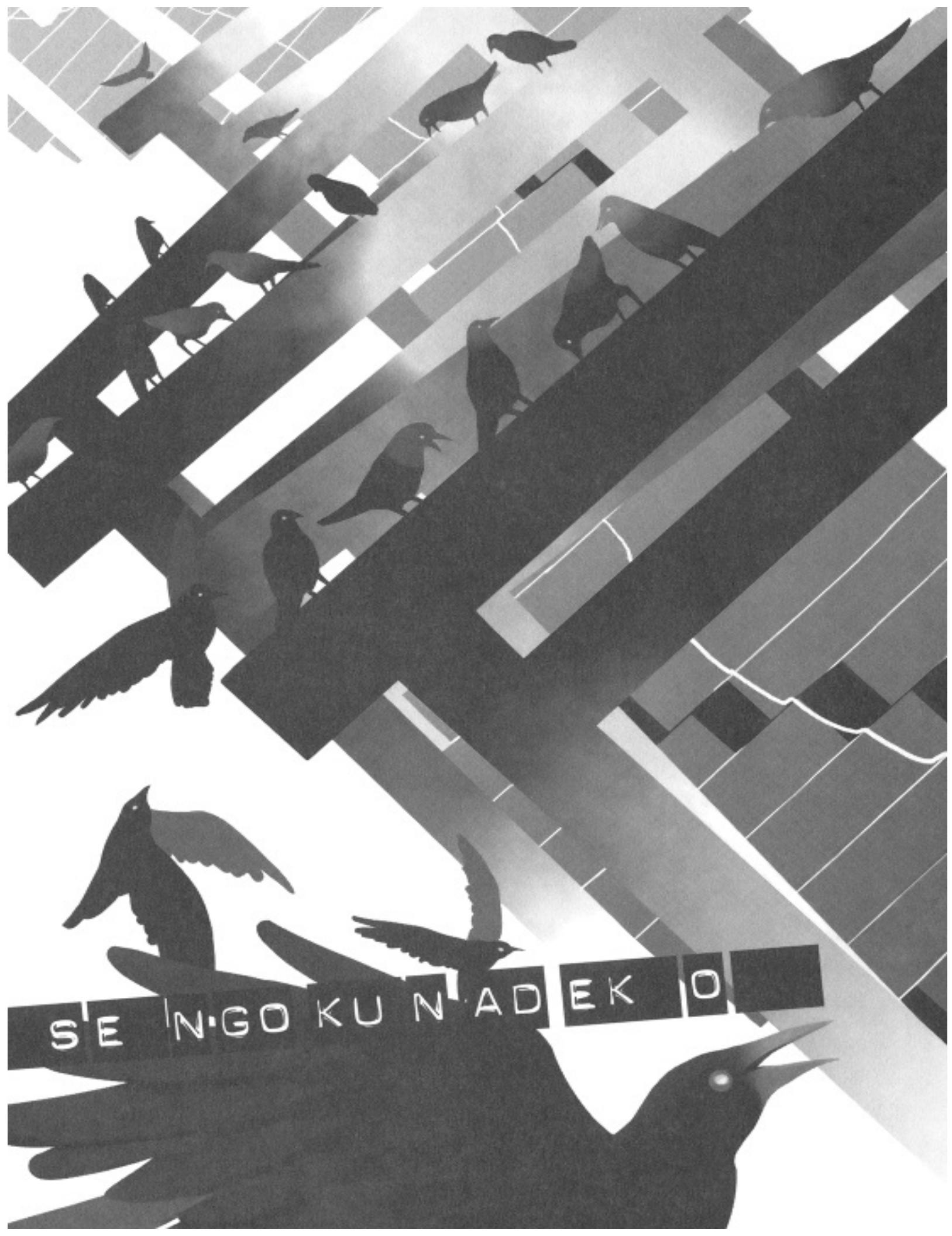


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SENGOKUNADEKIO



Sengoku Nadeko, age 14.

Born June 3rd, Gemini, blood type B.

Height 153 cm (still growing), weight ~38 kg.

Right-handed.

Visual acuity: 2.0 in both eyes.

Both parents healthy.

Allowance: ¥1,200 monthly.

Attends Public 701 Middle School, Class 2-2, roll call no. 28.

First term report card: Japanese 3, Math 2, Social Studies 4, Science 2, English 3, PE 2, Music 2, Art 4, Technology and Home Economics 5.

Strongest subject: none in particular. Weakest subject: Math.

School club: going home.

First term of first year, attended softball club, but within one month retired membership of own accord. Gave reason as: 'Tired.'

No bicycle owned.

No mobile phone owned. No PC owned.

Reads about 2 books per month.

Periodicals subscribed to: also 2 per month.

Friends on the few side.

No close friends. No boyfriend.

Rather than skirts, prefers trousers.

Rarely wears a skirt out of choice.

Resigned to it in the case of uniform.

Likes being barefoot, or sandaled.

Indoors, will go barefoot even in winter.

Put otherwise, does not like socks.

Wearing them feels disgusting.

Not particular about hairstyle, but fringe is long.

Has been growing it continuously since elementary school.

In the past hair was cut by parent, now by self.

Hobby: collecting hats.

Number of hats currently owned: 20. Has a variety of hats (from sun helmets to swimming caps), but

hats with a peak would be those favored.

Such hats are worn pulled down low over her eyes.

So that the eyes can't seen.

To get by without seeing eyes.

Does not like to make eye contact with people.

Does not like places with many people.

Personality is withdrawn, sullen, shy.

Vocabulary is limited and does not like speaking.

Cannot speak while looking at the other person's face.

Uncomfortable with people's gaze and does not like being looked at.

Hates both looking at and being looked at.

When talking, always keeps head down, facing the ground, haltingly putting words together in a whisper.

For the most part remains silent.

Mouth sealed.

Speechless, wordless.

Favorite food: Hamburg steak, yakisoba.

Favorite manga: those of the '80s.

Favorite novels: young adult fiction.

Favorite films: fantasy.

Favorite sport: figure skating (spectating).

Favorite games: retro.

Favorite music: folk song.

Favorite color: purple.

Favorite onii-chan: Koyomi Onii-chan.

Favorite person:

Araragi Koyomi.

# 002

Falling in love with someone is a simply marvelous thing, Nadeko believes.

With just that you feel like going on living, and with just that you cheer up, and you fill with a warm and fuzzy feeling, she believes.

The world is full of hardships, there are so many unpleasant things and so much that doesn't go your way, troubles are only ever piling higher, things which you thought everyday break down all too soon, supposedly reliable rules turn out to be unreliable, and both your body and spirit soon tire and wear out, until eventually you just want to drop down right there, but despite all that, through the emotion of being in love with someone, you can find the strength to persevere, and should that someone perhaps be there beside you, you can stay standing and go onward, she believes.

Even when you want to cry.

You can laugh, she believes.

.....

.....

.....

...But.

But why?

But why, Nadeko?

Why does Nadeko now find herself cowering?

Why is she cowering like this?

Head down, knees drawn in.

Crying like this?

She doesn't understand.

She doesn't understand, she doesn't understand, she doesn't understand.

Honestly, why?

Why did it turn out like this?

She doesn't understand.

And she doesn't even want to understand—

‘Why this, why that. As if ya didn't know why and how—aaan?’

Is what the white scrunchie wrapped around Nadeko's right-hand wrist says—or rather, it's not a scrunchie.

What might also look like a bracelet, is a white snake.

A white snake, with his scales standing on end.

The man (the snake?) himself had told her to say serpent rather than snake—apparently preferring the ring of it.

It suits him, he says.

But regardless, snake and serpent mean the same thing anyway, so it shouldn't be a problem describing this white scrunchie as a snake.

That's not where the problem is.

The problem is elsewhere.

The scrunchie—Serpent-san speaks.

His words brimming with malice.

No why or how—no two ways about it, he says.

‘Yer to blame for everything, ain’t ya—Nadeko-chan?’

‘...No.’

Nadeko objects.

But that objection is in fact no more than just a reaction, and Nadeko knows better than anyone that there’s not a scrap of conviction put into those words—Nadeko is merely reflexively denying what Serpent-san says.

A reaction and a reflex.

And not an objection at all.

‘It’s not Nadeko’s fault.’

Try as she might to give it another go, it only rings hollow.

Hollowly empty.

It’s quite the same as saying that it is Nadeko’s fault.

That said, the reality is that Serpent-san must only be saying this to taunt Nadeko and he himself probably doesn’t actually think she has done anything wrong—because, for Serpent-san, things like right and wrong, those sorts of notions invested in ethical values, don’t really enter into matters.

For this snake, there’s no right and wrong, but black and white.

White or black. Black or white.

That’s all there is to it.

No such thing as gray.

And no such thing as judgment.

After all, in his view—

‘Sha! Sha! Sha! Too right, Nadeko-chan. I thought ya were just some gormless brat, but turns out ya do actually grasp my nature. Or have ya only just got it at last? ’Cause, ya know, ain’t it already too late—aaan?’

Says Serpent-san.

She feels she could be swallowed by that gaping mouth—she flinches from those bared fangs.

Her body tightens up.

...No, that’s a lie.

She’s not scared of those fangs anymore.

She thinks nothing of them now.

The first time she “saw” Serpent-san, then she had been startled and scared, but now she would like to go back to that old self who had feared his sharpness.

Nothing’s scary anymore for Nadeko.

There's nothing to be afraid of left.

There's nothing left.

Back when those fangs were scary.

Back when she was a normal middle school girl.

...Back when Nadeko was a victim.

Just how much time had past since then?—That makes it sound so long ago, but it is not in fact so long ago at all.

It was just the other day.

She can remember it clearly.

But at the same time, even just the other day is now a past she can't go back to—her now distant past.

From the bottom of her heart, she thinks of how she longs to go back to that old self, but knows it's impossible.

‘Nah, it ain't like it's impossible, actually—Nadeko-chan. Going back to the past ain't as hard as you mammals think.’

Says Serpent-san.

Actually, apparently Serpent-san is not, in truth, speaking—he is communicating directly into Nadeko's thoughts.

That is according to him.

His voice is just a representation, he had said.

Or rather, he had not said.

It is not that he is actually telling her these things.

It's an auditory hallucination.

An illusion.

That is what she is hearing.

That is to say, it is an oddity.

That which is oddly other.

If she had just understood that more deeply—perhaps it would not have come this.

Not to this—not to anything.

‘What I'm saying is, Nadeko-chan, if what ya want is to go back to the past, I wouldn't mind granting that wish for ya—what with this Serpent-sama here, being what ya would call a god.’

‘God...’

She wonders.

It seems so empty.

It rings so horribly “vacant”.

A title that ought to inspire trust, to Nadeko now sounds so terribly glib. Like the math in her school

textbook, it does not register.

God.

God...

People all carry god in their heart. Faith lies only there—who was it that said that?

‘...Would anything change in the past?’

‘Nah, it wouldn’t, it wouldn’t. It’d all just happen over again. A refrain or a repeat. Or no, what we’d have here we could call the Ouroboros. Round and round, forever and eternally, just doing the same thing—and every time it’d come back to Nadeko-chan curled up here, just like this, crying, saying she wants to go back to her old self. And each time I’d grant that wish, all godly like.’

‘...That would be “tragic”.’

It would be “tragic”.

To say death would better, would on this occasion, be no exaggeration.

Conceivably—even living would be better.

To eternally relive these same feelings, she wouldn’t hesitate to call that synonymous with “hell”—but with that on one side, Nadeko also finds herself thinking.

Serpent-san himself—this white snake coiled right now about Nadeko’s right wrist—must have spent an eternity reliving that “hell”.

A snake that has lived for over a thousand years.

A snake that has died for over a thousand years.

Dying and living over and over.

A snake that became a god.

Yes. Say what you will, Serpent-san is a god—a god that Nadeko doesn’t believe in.

A god that Nadeko has “revived”.

‘In that case Nadeko doesn’t want to go back... Nadeko just wants to stay here like this.’

‘Well then. Well then. However, Nadeko-chan, ya say that, but Nadeko-chan, staying here like this? Right now, Nadeko-chan, do ya even know where ya are and what yer doing?’

‘...Nadeko knows that much.’

That much she knows.

There’s all sorts of things she no longer knows, but even Nadeko has not lost herself so far as to not at least know where she is.

She’s keeping it together. No, that’s a lie.

She’s lost herself. She’s gone.

But even so, she knows.

Where Nadeko is right now, at least.

That Nadeko is under the shrine, at least.

That she is curled up under the long ruined shrine—the North White Snake Shrine—at least.

‘...What would a stranger think if they saw Nadeko now? Hiding under a shrine. Would they think Nadeko was a thief?’

‘I dunno—but ya know, all humans are more or less basically thieves anyway. Every last one of them, always thinking of nothing but snatching what’s rightfully others’.’

‘Are they...?’

‘They are. These past few days, it’s Nadeko-chan who ought to have had that drilled into ya better than anyone else in the world. Aaan?’

‘...But surely there’s loads of people who aren’t like that.’

‘Nah, that “there’s loads of times when they aren’t like that” is what ya ought to say—it’s a matter of what they’re like at what times. Even good guys readily become villains, and villains too will do good. Everyone ya ever met will have been the same. Have ya forgotten, aaan?’

‘.....’

She had a feeling she had been led down the garden path there, but it was not particularly for that reason that Nadeko had fallen silent.

Nadeko often kept quiet when uncertain, but this time was different.

She was silent for a different reason.

Something rustled.

It was because of that sound that she fell silent.

It was the sort of sound at which the imaginary voice of Serpent-san and her own low whisper were cleared away—erased.

It was the sound of footsteps.

If viewed just as noise—no, heard just as noise, they could be thought of as being only the slightest of footsteps.

But to Nadeko they were a large sound.

A gigantically huge sound.

To Nadeko, those footsteps were like the “oncoming” of a “monster”.

Footsteps that would inevitably destroy everything, turning it all upside down—

‘.....!’

In that instant, it was blown away.

What was? The shrine was.

The shrine building that Nadeko had been hiding herself under the floor of.

That was what had been blown away—Um, there’s that fable of The Three Little Pigs, isn’t there? She hasn’t read it since childhood, so Nadeko doesn’t remember the details, but she’s sure there had been a house which the wolf had blown down.

“That’s quite the incredible lung capacity—how large must that wolf’s lungs be?” she had thought, but she had now, however, witnessed an actual enactment.

Perhaps that tale is not entirely a made-up story after all.

However, this time it had been no house of sticks, but lumber.

Of course, it's not likely to have been blown away by lung capacity—

‘Nice job taking yer time to ponder fairy tales in this emergency, Nadeko-chan—I had ya down as delicate, but ain’t this a surprise—ya got some brass. Got the knack of separating heart and mind, ya could say—Sha! Sha! So then I weren’t cockeyed crazy in choosing Nadeko-chan for my partner First to last I’d had my doubts about that, but in the very end of the very end, I’m finally sure.’

No.

He’s crazy.

For starters, Serpent-san did no such thing as choose Nadeko as his partner—neither Serpent-sar nor Nadeko had any such luxury of choice.

Crazy.

Even while feeling the pieces of the shrine fly away from above her head, Nadeko stayed, not raising her face, still clutching her knees, not even so much as quivering.

‘Oi, oi, Nadeko-chan. Don’t turn away from reality—just how long are ya gonna spend looking down? Whether ya shut yer eyes, avert yer eyes or hide yer eyes, reality ain’t just gonna up and disappear. As if ya don’t know, as if ya didn’t know—aaan?’

She doesn’t need to be told.

After all—even if Nadeko wants to make reality disappear, she couldn’t do it.

She knows.

What she doesn’t know—is why it all turned out like this.

With the roof gone—although, what’s gone is more properly the floor, rather than a roof—no, in fact the whole of the shrine building had gone, so it was of course true to say the roof is gone too—she realized for the first time that at some point it had started to rain.

Pelting down.

It’s a squall.

A cloudburst.

...Reflecting on the excellent naming of “cloudburst”, for a moment she had almost let her thoughts run away with themselves, but even without Serpent-san needing to chide her, she knew this wasn’t quite the time for it.

But in that moment, Nadeko was already soaked through.

Well, it might be better this way.

Even if her clothes grow heavy with water, this bears little relevance to Nadeko now. And this rain, which started she knows not when, might well hide Nadeko’s tears for her.

‘Ya don’t know when? Oi, oi, yer memory’s muddy, Nadeko-chan—aaan? Weren’t it to get out of the rain that ya hid under the shrine’s floor? Ya ran off into the mountains, but on top of everything it started to rain—’

‘Oh... Did it?’

She had forgotten. It doesn’t come clear to her.

Her “muddy” memory.

Well, Serpent-san says so, so she does think it’s true—however, leaving the truth of that matter aside, there may be no word that suits Nadeko now, quite as well as “muddy”.

Filthy.

Soiled.

Nadeko is well and truly muddied.

Sloppy and dripping.

‘Feels like yer muddied, but not muddled though, Nadeko-chan—well, that’s if ya ask me. Sha! Sha! I mean ya still seem to be keeping yer cool, even now.’

Cool?

Nadeko?

Could she be?

‘Yeah, that’s right—or rather than cool, cold-blooded maybe. Even in this downpour, yer picking up on his footsteps, ain’t ya?’

‘.....’

She was.

She is.

Even with her eyes down—even obstructed by the pounding of the rain, Nadeko could.

Those footsteps.

His footsteps.

These approaching footsteps—she could hear them.

She would hear them.

Because this person—is a person special to her.

The person Nadeko loves.

‘Hey, Sengoku.’

With a thud.

At the call of her name—she felt her heart beat.

She felt it start to pound.

She’s surprised she even has such a thing as a heart left inside her, and embarrassed at herself that she would react this way.

So.

She still has emotions.

Truly embarrassing.

She just wants to disappear.

‘What’s up? Look at me, Sengoku.’

‘.....’

Told to do so.

At last Nadeko raises her face.

Like a rock or a fossil, she had wanted to spend the rest of her life frozen like this—but at his words, her body obeys.

No.

This must be what Nadeko had wanted from the beginning.

She had hid. She had run away.

But even so—it must have been that she had wanted to be found by him.

She must have wanted him to come after her.

She must have wanted him to help her.

And then.

And then, to be exterminated by him—

‘I’ve come to kill you—Sengoku.’

At those words.

At those words—those alluring words—she could just melt.

And of course her body reacts to the sight of him.

The sight of Araragi Koyomi.

The sight she catches—of Koyomi Onii-chan.

She can see barely an inch through the rain, but she could see Koyomi Onii-chan clearly.

Clearly.

So very clearly.

‘Sha! Sha! But it ain’t for some emotional reason that ya can see him. It’s simply that ya can sense Koyomi Onii-chan’s body heat with the characteristic pit organs of a snake—’

Mocks Serpent-san.

It can’t be helped.

It’s Serpent-san’s job to mock.

‘—Yer a snake now, Nadeko-chan, see—and a poison snake to boot.’

‘.....’

Of course, the voice of Serpent-san doesn’t reach Koyomi Onii-chan—and it’s only his usual jeering.

Nadeko really can see him clearly.

It doesn’t matter what she’s told.

She can see him clearly.

It's not pit organs or any such thing—she can see him, Koyomi Onii-chan, clearly.

'Didn't I say? Don't turn away from reality—ya can't.'

Yes.

It's only natural.

After all, for close to six years—this is who she's been chasing after.

Even averting her eyes, this is the person she never turned away from.

Ragged school uniform. Long, disarranged hair.

Of his exposed skin, there was not a bit of it unhurt—blood trickled freely from the various wounds.

And Koyomi Onii-chan's left arm had been brutally torn away. No, more correctly it was connected by a scrap of flesh—but it hung perilously, looking ready to fall to the ground at a mere twist of his body.

Koyomi Onii-chan is a bloodsucking demon.

A vampire.

In the past he hadn't used to be, but more recently he had become one, apparently.

Nadeko had been told about this when they had been reunited and had in fact seen his abilities—but to look at him now, however, there was no sign of him manifesting his vampiric regeneration powers at all.

'Oi, oi, ain't that a cruel way to put it, Nadeko-chan? Weren't the one who put yer vampire onii-chan in this awful state, yerself?'

Put in Serpent-san.

He doesn't miss a chance to make a retort.

'Poison works on vampires too, ya see. The fangs ya stabbed with him are still stuck piercing him now.'

'...Oh. Right.'

That'll be it.

That's what it'll be.

It was Nadeko. Nadeko—was at fault.

No room for excuses and no grounds for extenuating circumstances.

It was Nadeko's fault.

'Well then... Nadeko's got to fight.'

She says.

And slowly stands up.

Serpent-san on her right wrist. A giant fang in her left hand.

Poison in her heart—she stands up.

At the movement, her wet fringe sways—no, separate to her own will, Nadeko's body was already

preparing for battle.

Of white or black, Koyomi Onii-chan, the vampire, would be black—overwhelming black.

With him before her, Nadeko's hair stood on end.

And each and every one of her hairs—was a snake.

A swarm of snakes.

Writhing, entwining snakes.

Yes.

It isn't just Serpent-san.

Nadeko now—has a hundred thousand snakes together with her.

Too many for there to be scope for Nadeko's will to grasp them all—it will be the snakes who will do the grasping.

No.

That's wrong.

She's trying to evade personal responsibility again—for a hundred thousand snakes.

The impetus is Nadeko and Nadeko is the source.

At fault must be the individual called Sengoku Nadeko.

It's "me".

Bound by a snake.

Possessed by a snake, it's "me".

'Hmph. She has fallen thoroughly, in both body and spirit, to the oddity, I deem—no, perhaps one ought, in such a case, rather say she has, to the oddity, ascended.'

Previously unnoticed, but having seemingly been beside Koyomi Onii-chan the whole time, was a little blonde girl who spoke now, her phrasing old-fashioned.

'I think I might at last perceive the why of Aloha Lad treating Forelock Girl so mindfully... No, no more now is she Forelock Girl, but Snake-locks Girl. Or—Snake Godly-locks, one might call her perhaps.'

'.....'

'My liege.'

Says the little blonde girl to Koyomi Onii-chan.

She speaks to him with an easy familiarity.

Acting like they were partners.

'Waver not. No longer is this your sister's friend, nor your darling junior—'tis an oddity, malevolent and fiendish.'

Naught.

But one single snake.

Said the little blonde girl—Oshino Shinobu.

‘I know. I get that.’

With those words, Koyomi Onii-chan nods.

They were on exactly the same wavelength.

And then he says:

‘This is my enemy—and your prey.’

‘.....’

‘Tuck in, Shinobu.’

At the same time as saying that.

Koyomi Onii-chan and Shinobu-san—paying no heed to the still falling rain, and without exchanging any particular signals, without even eye contact between them—came on at Nadeko.

Oh, how envious she was.

Nadeko thought.

Of who? Of Shinobu-san.

It was Nadeko who really wanted to be in that position.

She wanted to be beside Koyomi Onii-chan.

She wanted to be his partner.

Even if they couldn’t become lovers, she wanted to be by his side.

So then why is it Nadeko—who finds herself, like this, standing against Koyomi Onii-chan?

She doesn’t understand. She doesn’t understand.

She doesn’t understand—why is it that Nadeko.

That “I”.

Am Koyomi Onii-chan’s opponent?

‘Nadeko hates you so much, Koyomi Onii-chan!’

With the giant fang gripped in her left hand, Nadeko took a swing—and struck Koyomi Onii-chan in the heart.

It’s effectiveness was guaranteed.

Guaranteed by god.

Vampires are said to perish if a wooden stake is driven through their heart—but what about being staked with a white snake fang?

Nadeko’s beloved.

The heart of the person who was Nadeko’s beloved—Ahh.

It burst asunder.

Its flesh and blood fell onto Nadeko.

Like rain.

Like a cloudburst.

‘Hyaharr! Oi, oi, at last ya really gone and done it, Nadeko-chan!’

Serpent-san screeches.

The hundred thousand snakes too, cry out triumphant.

No.

That may only have been Nadeko’s own voice—why:

Because Sengoku Nadeko was laughing then.

For all that she wants to cry.

For all that she is crying—she’s laughing.

‘Aha.’

She laughs.

And laughs, and laughs, and laughs, and laughs.

It was all so hopelessly funny—

‘Ahahahahaha... Ahaha, ahahahahaha!’

No, no, really.

Why did it turn out like this?—Why?

Why?

## 003

Now the story goes back a thousand years.

...That’s going back too far?

It is a bit. Eh-heh-heh-heh.

Actually, Nadeko doesn’t really know much about what happened a thousand years ago either—and what she does know is only what Serpent-san had to say about it, which doesn’t have too much credence.

Credence, with the same root as “creed”, sounds somewhat god related, but that’s another topic.

You shouldn’t just swallow what Serpent-san has to say—or at least certainly not whole, like a snake.

And who really cares about a thousand years ago anyway?

Sooo...

The story will go back only as far as what Nadeko can speak of as having experienced for herself—

meaning, only back to the day she met Serpent-san.

That will have some credence.

At least to Nadeko.

Sure, there might be some things that are misremembered—and, in fact, there are—but there are many things in this world which you can't forget even if you try, many things in this world you can't fudge even by lying—and for Nadeko meeting Serpent-san was one such thing.

Why that's.

Because it dragged up that snake from the past—dragged up the snake that once wrapped around Nadeko.

With a slither... Slithering back.

Like Nadeko, for so long dragging out those feelings from elementary school—slithering.

Well, the date that day was October 31st, a Tuesday—which is to say that it happened to be Halloween, but frankly though, it's not an event Nadeko is too familiar with.

She doesn't really know what kind of day it is.

Oshino Meme-san, an authority on the supernatural who had once come to this town, had said:

‘I think it'd be good if Halloween and Thanksgiving caught on a bit more in Japan. Seeing how Christmas has become such a major event.’

But Nadeko doesn't know much about Thanksgiving either.

But she thinks giving thanks is certainly important.

She's thankful to Oshino-san.

And Kanbaru-san, and Koyomi Onii-chan.

She's thankful to them all.

Without them Nadeko would not be here now, living safe and sound through halcyon days like this—halcyon days?

No.

That June, what Nadeko had learned from those people was that in this world there may be no such thing as halcyon days.

Halcyon.

Only inside a TV could such days be found.

C-ON!

There was a 4-koma manga called that, wasn't there?

It was pretty good.

How nice it would be to live like that, Nadeko thinks, but that's probably impossible in her reality. She knew it couldn't be like that at Nadeko's school.

In fact, that October morning was one of “dejection”—no, that's not to say that the “dejection” was limited to that day.

Every morning was one of “dejection”.

More specifically, the “dejection” was for every journey to school—whether the 31st, the 30th or the 1st.

Whether it be October, September or November.

There was no trip to school without “dejection”.

Ever since that day.

Ever since June.

April, for instance, was different.

May, she supposed, had been too.

Kaiki Deishuu, an infamous con artist, had come to this town apparently following rumors of the vampire Oshino Shinobu-san, so events may have been set in motion already by April or May—but regardless, the tangible effects of this, including Nadeko’s case, were from June—

‘Uh-oh! Loo—!’

With this, Nadeko, burdened with her “dejection”, but nevertheless heading for school with plenty of time to avoid being late, found herself, upon turning a corner, about to be run into by a bike.

It’s a bike. Meaning, a bicycle.

Unlike the city bike which Koyomi Onii-chan rides (from the looks of which it appears Koyomi Onii-chan isn’t fussy at all about bikes) this was a pretty stylishly designed BMX.

Unable to move in that instant, Nadeko’s head span with flashes of her future—ah, Nadeko’s going to get run over, she’ll be hospitalized with a broken bone, she’ll not have to go to school, would Koyomi Onii-chan come to visit her, she better prepare some attractive pajamas—however, the cyclist declared:

‘Loo—!—ks like I’ve got this!’

And yanked the handles through a considerably reckless trajectory.

The front wheel formed a T with the frame.

To be fair, it probably was too late for the brakes to work, but doing this would be structurally the same as the bike’s frame colliding with a wall.

Frankly Nadeko thought that she was small enough to avoid simply by steering around her with a light turn of the handles, without needing to take such drastic action—but then she supposed the cyclist was in a panic too.

The front wheel stops, but still the back wheel alone drives on, and:

Hop.

As a result, the bike passed—no, skimmed—over the top of Nadeko’s head.

As a 4-koma title: “H-OP!”

After that, the bike and its rider went spinning flat across the ground, kicking up sparks like a firework—but anyway, Nadeko had suffered no injuries, let alone a broken bone.

But she was blanched.

...It was over in an instant, but it could not have been more traumatic—it was a traumatic experience. Monsters and the supernatural—those are certainly scary things, but that sort of psychological scariness can be surpassed in a moment by the very real, concrete scariness of something like a “traffic incident”.

For the time being, she quite forgot the “dejection” of going to school.

‘Are... are you okay!?’

Nadeko, coming to her senses with a start, rushes over to where the bicycle lay, having landed in the road—of course, it wasn’t injuries to the bicycle she was worried about, but to the girl who lies pinned underneath it.

It’s a girl.

By the rules of the road, fault probably lay with cyclist for coming out without checking left and right, but it was also the case that Nadeko had been walking along without paying attention—well, no, even leaving that aside, it was a concern.

If a person has collapsed, you would be concerned for them. She may only have fallen off a bike, but even an accident like that could be serious if there’s been a blow to the head.

Perhaps it would be best to call an ambulance.

But Nadeko wasn’t carrying a phone.

These days, public phones had become a scarcity in the town, so if she were to call for help, she would need to go to one of the houses around here—ah, but talking to a stranger would be quite impossible for Nadeko.

Then maybe if she returns home for now—

‘—I’m fine!’

‘Kyaa!’

Nadeko screamed.

Just as Nadeko reached the girl, she suddenly—like some wind-up toy—sat bolt upright. No, it had the suddenness of an automaton, but to Nadeko the impression was exactly that of a zombie—until then the girl had appeared entirely to be in a limp, motionless state.

Yes.

Just like times when Koyomi Onii-chan is dead.

...

Though that’s quite the bizarre description.

‘You hurt, Sengoku-chan?’

The girl turned to Nadeko and asked.

Her face is a breezy smile. Really terrifically charming.

However, Nadeko only quailed at that smiling face.

‘Hmm? Something up, Sengoku-chan? I thought I’d pulled the dodge off, or did I graze a strand of your hair? If so, my bad, my bad, Sengoku-chan.’

‘H... how...’

She couldn’t speak properly. Well, Nadeko was timid and shy like this no matter who she was talking to... But today, talking to this person, all the more than usual, she couldn’t get her words out properly.

She was “uncommonly” afraid.

It would be fair to say.

‘H-How do you know...? Nadeko’s name...?’

‘Hm?’

‘How do you know... Nadeko’s... name...?’

‘Hmm?’

The girl’s eyes widen.

The very charming smile was still there—but it had unmistakably stiffened.

Like, a dawning realization were showing through.

‘Oh, that’s right!’

She said and rolled her eyes.

‘Damn, I haven’t met Sengoku-chan yet.’

‘Huh...?’

‘Oh, drat... I’ve got the order wrong... This is all because I’m having such trouble finding Hachikuji-chan... She’s all too irregular, that girl, I tell you. A right nuisance. Oh, what shall we do...’

While saying this, she gets to her feet and pulls the bicycle upright.

And then starting anew:

‘A pleasure to meet you, you lovely young lady!’

She said.

It is resoundingly belated.

Though it’s an “admirable” show of nerve.

‘I’m called Oshino Ougi!’

‘...Oshino?’

Oshino? Isn’t Oshino...

Oshino Meme—Oshino Shinobu.

No, this is someone else.

She was called Oshino Ougi.

This is the first Nadeko had heard that name—just someone with the same family name?

‘Er, what do I say to get me through this one then? All right, well, wasn’t it that with this girl I just have to use Araragi-senpai’s name? Okay, er, Sengoku-chan, it was from Araragi-senpai that I heard

about you. Look, you can tell by my uniform, right? I'm Araragi-senpai's schoolmate. Kanbaru-san's schoolmate too. That's schoolmate, not cool mate! I'm a first year at Naoetsu High School.'

'.....'

What a jumble.

Higgledy-piggledy even.

Faced with this person, you wouldn't have to be Nadeko to be left speechless.

But Koyomi Onii-chan's schoolmate?

Not his cool mate.

And Kanbaru-san's—certainly, now that she mentions it, the uniform she's wearing was indeed that of their school, Naoetsu High School.

She knows she's being foolish.

But Nadeko can't help but feel a little reassured at that. As patently suspicious as this grade-A suspicious character is, and really, she knows she's being foolish, but just by virtue of this girl being a student at the same school as Koyomi Onii-chan, she couldn't help but grant her a little bit of trust.

Not that Nadeko thinks this would have made a visible change to her manner.

She is, as ever, still nervously averting her eyes downward.

Not saying anything.

The usual "orthodox" pattern is that, while she holds her silence like this, the other person will always get fed up, and with something like a 'Forget it!' go somewhere else, leaving Nadeko to be.

That's the usual pattern.

'Aw, no good, huh?'

But this girl—Ougi-san, just rolls her eyes again.

Instead of saying "Forget it!" or leaving Nadeko be.

She continued to mutter.

'I've made a right mess of my start. Well, never mind. Sengoku-chan's case is basically a side-story anyway. This isn't going to end up like it did with Tsubasa-senpai of the Hanekawas—Okay, so.'

Ougi-san holds her right hand out to Nadeko.

'I'm Oshino Meme's niece.'

'.....'

'I've heard about you from my uncle too—that you're a girl who is a victim. Even if it's thanks to Kaiki-san's involvement, someone purely a victim is quite the rarity when it comes to oddities.'

Even so, said Ougi-san.

She said brightly.

'It's not like a person will always be a victim, will they—Sengoku-chan? It's just, there are times when they're a victim and times when they're a victimizer. Or maybe even now you still think yourself a victim?'

‘.....’

‘No response, huh.’

Ougi-san shrugs, blithely.

‘Staring down like that, silent, never saying anything, maybe you really can go on being a victim—but I wonder whether that’ll go so well this time.’

‘.....’

‘This time is an exception—perhaps.’

‘.....’

‘Isn’t it nice and easy being a victim? You get all that sympathy and kindness. Well, victim blaming is also a thing, but essentially that’s a way of saying: “Victimizers are victims too.” I believe Uncle hated this kind of thinking, but, well, it might be apt to see everyone in the world as a victim. And having said that, turning it back around, maybe from the beginning it wasn’t like Sengoku-chan either was quite so purely a victim—and maybe in this story, that will be laid bare.’

‘...S-Story?’

‘Yeah.’

Says Ougi-san.

‘Don’t tell me you thought yourself to be living an ordinary life with no narrative at all, did you, Sengoku-chan?’

With a ‘See ya.’

Ougi-san mounted her bike—which was seemingly still roadworthy after its crash—and, with whirring pedals and nimble handling, departed off on her way.

Like always.

Nadeko thinks.

Nadeko hadn’t been able to speak properly and the other person got fed up and left—just like always.

She hadn’t said “Forget it!” as such, but the result is as always.

The “orthodox” pattern.

Nothing to be surprised about.

There ought not to be.

Only...

‘...Huh?’

There was nothing to be surprised about—and yet, there remained a slight sense of unease. No, but really only slight.

So slight she would doubtless forget it by tomorrow, never to remember again, but there is this unease.

For some mysterious reason, though she had had no mind to be held up talking so long, now that she

notices it—now that she looks at the time, a quite substantial amount has gone and passed.

How to put it.

It was as though she had been robbed of time.

She couldn't think that she had enjoyed the conversation with Ougi-san so much as to forget the passage of time, but—only, why was it?

Sometime again.

She felt she was going to have to talk with that person—why would that be?

No.

To tell you the conclusion upfront, in fact no such opportunity would arrive—after all, before Nadeko could ever meet her again.

She would be killing Koyomi Onii-chan.

## 004

Incidentally, Nadeko had ignored the hand that Ougi-san had held out to her—which is not to say that she hadn't seen it.

With her eyes downcast, not looking at Ougi-san's face, the hand had been there in Nadeko's field of vision—in fact, what with staring down, it had been practically the only thing that she could see. If Nadeko wasn't mistaken, Ougi-san must have wanted to shake Nadeko's hand.

Ougi-san had withdrawn her hand, still smiling, as though it were nothing, but it wouldn't be strange if someone in that position had taken offense.

No, Ougi-san probably had been offended, Nadeko thinks.

Saying all those weird things about victims and victimizers, ordinary life and stories, before leaving—that was probably a way of getting back at Nadeko for being rude.

Fanning insecurity by casting insinuations was a common and effective verbal tactic.

However.

Nadeko just can't.

Even knowing that it will cause offense, it's still no use.

She can't be touched by people.

She can't touch people.

Shaking hands was quite out of the question. Nadeko couldn't stand even light physical intimacy, like a slap on her arm—it makes her jump.

It makes her shudder.

The “Nade” of “Nadeko” means “stroke”, but she hates having her head stroked.

She's Nodon'tko.

It wouldn't be putting it too strongly to say she thinks she would rather be punched.

At least that would just be an instant—*with no time for any mingling*.

Mingling of what? Of warmth. Of body heat.

Yes.

Nadeko can't stand people's body heat—she can't stand to feel the warmth of other people's skin. She finds the mingling of her own and someone else's body heat deeply unpleasant.

When shaking hands with someone, for example, the sensation of that person's hand being warm—or alternatively cool—is agony for her.

It's enough to make her sweat.

That did mean though, to go into specifics, that she was surprisingly fine with being touched over her clothes.

'To be excessively averse to contact with other people, is an indication of the strength of self-consciousness. We could infer from this, that while you appear meek, you may instead carry a strong resolve against dependence on others.'

—Was what she had been told when she had spoken to Hanekawa-san about it, but Nadeko supposes this had been Hanekawa-san's fashion of kindness.

She had probably been choosing her words tactfully.

In actuality, Nadeko is just a coward.

She is simply afraid even of depending on others.

But then, if you ask Nadeko, the real mystery is everyone else though—how do they do it?

So easily trust their hearts to others?

Let themselves be touched?

Nadeko doesn't want to be touched and she won't trust anyone.

Well, leaving all that aside, Nadeko has reached her school. She has arrived at her destination.

Her traffic incident with Ougi-san (Ougi-san's self-inflicted crash, in the end), hadn't made Nadeko late—she may have been somehow held up longer than she thought, but Nadeko leaves home with ample time to cope with contingencies on her commute.

What had made her start guarding against such contingencies was, but of course, what had happened in June.

But rather than prudence, it was probably foremost anxiety.

...Come to mention it.

That hadn't been all that intolerable.

That experience, back then, of having a snake wrapped directly onto her skin—Ah, yes.

She had learned about this in Science class. A snake is a cold-blooded animal—so it wouldn't particularly have its own body heat.

Today's October 31st. While it had yet to snow, it was already cold enough to be rightly called winter—it's cold and chilly out. Which means it's the time of year when snakes, being reptiles, may already be dormant.

Entering the school building, she goes to change her shoes.

From outdoor shoes, to indoor ones.

Class 2-2's shoe rack, 2nd row from the top, is for Nadeko too high to reach without a bit of a stretch—every time she comes to school and every time she heads home, meaning every time that she uses this shoe rack, she thinks of how she wishes she were a bit taller.

She takes off her outdoor shoes first and, standing on the duckboard, extends her arm upward.

She reaches with her fingers into her compartment—

‘Hya—Uwah!’

She's screamed again. The second time today.

For all that she's normally quiet, naturally even Nadeko's screams are loud.

Though she had frozen when almost run down by Ougi-san, this time she takes a dramatic pratfall.

She's in a slightly indecent pose.

Someone watching may have thought it looked like she had lost her balance stretching too far and slipped in her socks on the duckboard. Like a klutz.

But she hadn't. That's not it.

Nadeko, unable yet to stand, looks at her right hand—the hand she had just put into the compartment.

‘.....’

Seeing nothing out of the ordinary with that hand, she then looks toward the shoe rack—but all she could see there was shoe storage.

Nadeko's indoor shoes were protruding slightly.

But she couldn't see what she was looking for.

No white snake.

‘.....’

But she had felt something.

For Nadeko, a nostalgic feeling, she could probably call it—that feeling, *like a snake wrapping itself onto her skin*.

Supple and hard.

Sleek, but scaly.

And without feeling body heat.

That feeling of life—*that binding*.

‘.....’

Skin crawling.

Nadeko stands and then stretches, cautiously trying to peek into her compartment—only of course,

she hasn't the height.

If only she had something to stand on, but she could see nothing so convenient nearby.

For now, she settles for gingerly using her fingernails to draw her shoes out the rest of the way from the compartment—she then checks inside the shoes.

Empty. There's nothing in them.

No socks, no human feet, and of course—no white snake.

It isn't there, and isn't to be seen.

‘.....’

Well, it's true Nadeko is a person with fewer friends than most, she's shy and rarely talks, and with how uncomfortable she is with contact with other people, even to the point of disgust, she can be a difficult kid to deal with, but normally, it's not like she gets bullied—so she's never had a snake put in with her shoes.

Come to that, that's going beyond the level of bullying. Any human who would do such a thing would be even scarier than the bullying itself.

Ummm, in other words, what Nadeko wants to say is, Nadeko is not a person of such significance that anyone would take the trouble to bully her by putting a live snake in with her shoes.

For being hated is also itself a talent and legitimate idiosyncrasy.

Even in June—that had been a matter of various things that had occurred outside of Nadeko's involvement.

Oshino-san, and Ougi-san this morning, had said Nadeko was a “victim”—but to Nadeko's mind she wasn't even a victim in that sense.

The word collateral.

She had to feel this seemed most appropriate to her.

Given.

Given the current dire state of Class 2-2—she couldn't help but think that.

Yes.

Regardless of things like Nadeko's personality or disposition—the way Class 2-2 was now, *no one was going to be up to any bullying*.

‘...May've just imagined it.’

Just to be careful, she hopped up a few times to try to get a (poor) view of inside the compartment and there seemed to be nothing amiss.

Even so, it's curious.

If she had simply imagined it, then it was only her imagination, and that would naturally be for the best—all's well that ends well—but why was it?

If she had only imagined that sensation of a snake binding onto her—then why was it that, without having been able to see that snake, Nadeko would have felt that it were a “white” snake—

‘What happened, Sengoku-san? Is everything okay?’

A girl from the same year asked Nadeko, concerned about her (what could only have looked like) bizarre actions at the shoe rack.

In her small voice.

‘It’s fine.’

Nadeko replies, lowering her head.

‘It’s fine.’

Nadeko couldn’t tell whether the girl had heard or not, but she headed off for her classroom as though satisfied—the girl was in a different class from Nadeko, so naturally it was for a different classroom that she headed.

The shoe rack here being Class 2-2’s, students from her own class are not absent from around Nadeko—but they do not ask about her behavior.

It is without even looking at her, and without saying a word to each other, that each of them heads off for their classroom.

Yes.

They would, wouldn’t they?

That’s just the way Class 2-2 was these days.

For this is the “dejection” of her school life.

## 005

If you asked whose fault it was, well, it wasn’t particularly anyone’s fault... But should, perforce, an anonymous vote be used to pick a single person as the source who called forth the current state of affairs, then Nadeko thinks it would be, unanimously, that con artist, Kaiki Deishuu-san.

He’s a shoo-in.

No, this is making it sound like he’s an acquaintance, but Nadeko has never met the man.

Only, he’s more than an acquaintance.

In terms of the influence he’s had, he’s a truly major figure. A VIP, you could call him.

With the exception of her family, Koyomi Onii-chan and Tsukihi-chan, he is the person who has left the deepest impression in her life so far—why, because it’s thanks to him that her life has become so destabilized.

Derailed. And broken.

.....

Ah, would this be the sort of way of putting things that reeks a bit of victimhood?

Oh dear, oh dear. Nadeko takes that back.

What's destabilized is Nadeko's surroundings.

What's derailed. And what's broken too.

They're the things around her, not Nadeko.

Nadeko, for her part, is still living even now, currently, exactly as she has—with any change, since long before Kaiki-san came to this town.

Only.

Now the classmates around Nadeko—have all simply become the same as her. That's really all it is.

That's why, to make a point of it, it's Nadeko's classmates who are the victims.

This may be taking the story through something of a detour, but Nadeko does think it's important, so let her talk a bit about past events.

To put it simply.

The events of June.

Or rather, one page from the case file of Kaiki-san's scams—though Nadeko herself does not know all that much about it, she has, to some extent, heard tell of it from Tsukihi-chan of Tsuganoki 2nd Middle School's Fire Sisters.

Kaiki Deishuu is a spiritualist, who styles himself a Ghost Buster.

It may make sense to say he is in the same line of work as Oshino-san, but it seems he is a little different in his disposition, as Kaiki-san apparently uses his spiritual abilities wholly for the pursuit of profit.

To call him a charlatan psychic would be putting it “forthrightly”.

However, perhaps it's for the best to put it “forthrightly” here.

This year, the place the man had apparently chosen to set himself up in was this town where Nadeko lives—Kaiki-san had made the town's middle schools his target.

To put it “forthrightly” again, by spinning his web here, it had not just been himself whom he had set up.

The scam involved selling bogus charms to large numbers of middle school students—the actual fees taken were, it must be said, no great sums.

It was in the realm manageable with their allowances.

Low margin high volumes sales, Kaiki style.

There were, of course, some kids who went too far, and the trouble from that set the Fire Sisters into action—however, looking back in hindsight, what became the real trouble was with the majority of those scammed—the ones who weren't taken for more than their allowance stretched to, who hadn't been seen as a problem.

Yes.

If only it had come to a head for them and ended at that—like the way things had for Nadeko.

That's why Nadeko, she thinks, could go on living after the incident in the same (sullen) manner, unchanged in her disposition, just as she had been living before the incident.

Coming to a head as an “incident” and being “resolved”, can be seen as being like an important “rite”.

For her classmates, for whom things never came to a head and who therefore *did not perform* that “rite”—for whom things just somehow came to an end—their school life now was spent still holding on to feelings that had just been left festering.

Continuing such a “vague” way of talking about “festering” feelings, won’t convey things properly, Nadeko thinks, so to make it clearer, she’ll put it bluntly—essentially, within the class:

“Who likes whom.”

“Who hates whom.”

“Who thinks what of whom”

“Who wants to do what to whom”

And other similar, very intimate, private information—their “feelings toward everyone”—had all been rendered “exposed”.

The charms Kaiki-san had spread were aimed at middle schoolers, so essentially all had been related to personal relationships, one way or another.

In the first place, the scam “charms” Kaiki-san had sold really were hokum and, “almost” all, had no actual effect whatsoever—so, the thing was, without any results being produced, the causes alone were left.

Finding out how someone they thought they got on well with really thought of them, or learning the agenda of someone who had been kind to them—their relationships wouldn’t be able to go on the way they had, would they? They wouldn’t be able get on with people the same way as before.

...Well, you can probably imagine most of the rest of how it went.

Of course, it wasn’t that Kaiki-san’s aim had been the destruction of human relationships—Kaiki-san was only ever interested in the middle schoolers’ money.

It was business.

And nor had Kaiki-san picked out Nadeko’s class as a target—his targets had been the middle school kids throughout the town.

Only, by some cruel twist of fate—or no, it was probably no such grandiose thing, but simply a confluence of coincidences—Kaiki-san’s “charms” became, for whatever reason, a contagion in Nadeko’s class.

If it had been influenza, it would have been cause enough for a shutdown of classes.

The result of all this, is the “dejection” of school life now—strained, depressed, a class in which no one can speak their mind, and the peace is only surface deep.

In which whatsoever is said, it is taken as a lie, as a front, as not what they really feel—  
In which no incidents occur.

A class in which nothing happens.

A class in which everyone feigns sleep.

A class in which no one wants to do anything.

Surely everyone here must be looking forward to being assigned different classes next year—it can't get any worse than the terrible state now, Nadeko thinks, so she wouldn't say she is any exception.

Though she thinks things might work out.

She also thinks things might never work out.

That it is too late for things to work out.

‘.....’

Good morning.

She thought of saying, but of course could not, so Nadeko, like always, entered the classroom wordlessly—there are some students who turned at her entrance, while others made no reaction, but that too is not something Nadeko pays much attention to anymore.

She's used to it.

She's used to this—this atmosphere like she had just boarded a train at a station.

Keeping a low posture to avoid attention, Nadeko goes to her own desk.

They'll have a short test during homeroom this morning, so she'll need to prepare—

‘.....’

...This time she didn't scream.

It was the third time after all.

And she was in this classroom—if someone screamed in a train, they would be thought weird, wouldn't they?

But while it was the third time she had been given cause to scream, it was, however, only the second time in terms of snakes.

From within Nadeko's desk—this time clearly—a white snake had appeared.

With a slither, it crept out, baring its fangs.

But quickly it had gone again.

Nadeko, as though nothing had happened, sat in her chair and prepared for the test—well, perhaps even if this had been the first time, Nadeko may not have screamed.

After all, this class was already being tightly constricted by something like a snake.

Something coiling onto her, is nothing to scream about anymore—so long as she isn't bitten into.

# 006

...Only, well, that attitude did not last for long.

It wasn't an issue of getting used to it.

From inside her bag, her pencil case, PE clothes, the cleaning cupboard, around the corners of corridors and even, at the worst, from between the pages of textbooks and exercise books—a “white snake” appearing, slithering toward her. With this sort of thing carrying on, it’s only natural her spirit would break. She would lose her strength.

There’s no longer any surprise. But it’s draining.

She’s exhausted. And fed up with it.

It feels like she’s opening a whole row of jack-in-the-boxes.

Knowing already that something will happen if the boxes are opened, and yet having to go on and on opening them all the same, is itself a manner of “torment”.

Hallucinations.

Is what she thinks they are.

Despite believing herself to be fine, while spending her school life in this “dejection”, she may have been under a severe stress, with starting to hallucinate a white snake being an outcome of that. After all, to bring up a very famous example, wasn’t the manga artist Eguchi Hisashi-san said to have suffered hallucinations of an albino alligator?

*Only—if it weren’t a hallucination.*

*If by any chance it were “one of those”.*

...She could not help but consider.

According to Oshino-san, a specialist, “Meet with an oddity, and to oddities you will be drawn,” so apparently someone who has been affected by an oddity even just once, will be more easily affected by an oddity after that too.

No such thing had happened to Nadeko outside of that June—but perhaps now the first time was upon her.

The first time, or rather the second.

Though she did, of course, feel scared.

She had been braced for it.

One day, she had felt, such a day as this would come—enough, that what may have been scarier were all the days of nothing happening.

Over “something may happen”, she feels “something has happened” is more bearable, you see.

A state of anticipation will only compound stress.

In her class, Nadeko learns that daily.

Only, with that said, against this phenomenon, Nadeko has no measures she can take.

If anything, when previously she had attempted to deal with this kind of situation through what knowledge she could gather by self-study (or what could barely be called that—she had stood reading in a bookstore) it had only made the situation worse.

Something that would have been well and good if left alone.

Without being left—had become something awful.

She had had a torrid time of it.

So she waited until the end of the day's lessons, called Koyomi Onii-chan from the public phone inside the school, and explained to him what had happened.

She had been told by him before.

That if anything related to oddities were ever to occur, she must soon phone him.

So that's what she did.

'A snake...? A snake, huh.'

However, Koyomi Onii-chan's reaction was frankly rather indistinct.

Nadeko thinks that, what with her having already got somewhat used to the shock, the way she explained it must lack a sense of urgency—instead she wished she had phoned him back when she first saw (felt) the white snake in the shoe rack.

That was the one time of which Nadeko could say unequivocally that she had been shocked.

'Is it the snake from before?'

'No... Not that. It's not.'

She can't speak properly.

Please don't look down on Nadeko. Even if it's Koyomi Onii-chan she's talking to, she can't speak fluently.

She tenses up no matter who it is. Even when speaking to her parents.

'The snake before... how to put it... like, it was invisible, wasn't it? But this time, it's visible... Um, though not the first time, but after that...'

'Oh? Hmm...'

Nadeko knows she's not putting things coherently, but Koyomi Onii-chan listens to her patiently.

He's a man of fortitude.

'So the way things seem right now, there's been no real harm? It's not like it's fastened itself onto your body or—'

'N-Nope. It hasn't.'

Nadeko abruptly cuts in.

Now Nadeko's being the snake, ho-ho.

It had been with the thought of not wanting him to worry, but she wonders if she hasn't achieved the opposite instead. Koyomi Onii-chan, in spite of an uninviting look about him, is someone whose emotions show easily in his expression, so he's surprisingly easy to talk to face to face, but talking to him on the phone like this, unable to see him, it's hard to know what he might now be thinking.

Not knowing this, she's struggling with what she's saying.

She's struggling with her thoughts too.

How can Nadeko properly explain the situation she's been put in now?

...Put in?

Nadeko's put in it, is she?

'From, like, some kind of gap or inside a space that had been closed, those sorts of places... Suddenly appearing...'

'Hmm... So essentially, you're saying that from "places you couldn't previously see", a snake all of a sudden appears. Well, certainly snakes are known to "lurk". They're not keen on bright places, I guess—'

Koyomi Onii-chan goes over what Nadeko had told him, mulling it.

'—Might be a type of "shocker" oddity? The sort that just surprise humans for no reason...'

'? There's such a thing? Oddities that just surprise humans...?'

Like a nopperabo? No, Nadeko seems to remember reading, from when she had been researching such stories, about how the faceless nopperabo, being nopperabo, have rather sad origins.

'Well, yeah, see, superstitions fundamentally have a lot to do with attaching reasons in order to explain that which is unexplainable. And, if you think about what surprises people, that's the unexplainable. Same as the things that go bump in the night. Oddities are inseparable from the shocking.'

Says Koyomi Onii-chan.

The way he talks about it, he's sounding like an expert.

So dashing. So splendid.

Of course, Nadeko knows that Koyomi Onii-chan must be repeating back what he had heard from Oshino-san or Hanekawa-san, or perhaps the little blonde vampire girl, but even taking that away, she thinks Koyomi Onii-chan is splendid.

...Although if you did take that away, quite what remains, is a question even for her.

'But... Apart from at the shoe rack, Nadeko didn't get surprised.'

'I've thought this before, but... You know what, Sengoku? You're actually pretty mentally strong.'

'? Really?'

She's not though.

'Well, if I saw snakes appear out of gaps, I'm confident I'd be shocked every time. I reckon I'd make quite the winsome reaction faces, even if I do say so myself.'

'You always know how to please!'

'...Ah, no, I wouldn't say that... Well, never mind...'

Koyomi Onii-chan was silent for a bit.

'Okay, so... Well, it's not like all snakes are poisonous. Some are harmless. Yeah...'

I made a mistake that time with the jagirinawa though—says Koyomi Onii-chan.

? A mistake? Had he made some kind of mistake?

What Nadeko remembers of that time, was Koyomi Onii-chan saving her without a hitch...

'Can you think of anything that might be the cause of it?'

‘Cause?’

‘Something that could be a trigger, or whatever, for why there’d be an illusion of a white snake appearing over and over in your surroundings... Like, say, anything you remember doing?’

‘Remember doing...’

She thinks.

But nothing comes to mind.

So, without having come up with anything:

‘...No. There’s nothing.’

She said.

‘Hmm... With an oddity, there’s supposed to be some fitting reason behind it, apparently, but, well, your case is a bit different then—it was last time too.’

‘.....’

‘Well, if it’s not urgent, then maybe let’s just wait until night.’

‘Night?’

‘Wait for Shinobu to wake up, is what I mean—lately, she’s been living a very strict routine. By lately, that’s about the last two months, though.’

‘Oh... Why?’

‘Ah, she really screwed things up pretty badly the other day, you see... Well, that was mostly my fault too though, but Shinobu’s taken it hard, and is still down about it. She took it hard enough that for a time she spoke to me politely.’

‘.....’

So whatever it was that happened, the main point is that, feeling very down has, apparently, made that girl take her lifestyle more seriously. That following proper sleeping patterns, her being a vampire, means sleeping through the day and waking at night, is perhaps a little ironic.

‘Shinobu didn’t assist that time with the jagirinawa—but now we’re going to have to get her to lend us some help.’

‘.....’

That Shinobu-san had not assisted that time would be down to her relationship with Koyomi Onii-chan not having been as good then as it is now, so she wouldn’t even have been asked in the first place.

Nadeko doesn’t know the girl all that well, but even so, that she had somehow apparently been reconciled with Koyomi Onii-chan had been pleasing news.

Just what you would expect of Koyomi Onii-chan.

‘Um... Shinobu... Shinobu-san eats oddities, doesn’t she?’

Nadeko had heard that was the sort of vampire she was.

The Oddity Killer or some such.

‘So, would she... eat... the white snake Nadeko saw?’

‘It might come to that—but it’s not like it’s okay to have her just eat anything and everything, so what we actually need is the knowledge in her head. Specialist knowledge passed on from Oshino. Anyways, if she complains of hunger, I’ll just have to feed her Mister Donut’s wares, pre-chewed.’

‘Yep. Okay...’

Huh? Pre-chewed?

No, Nadeko must have misheard him say free food.

...Does Shinobu-san ever pay?

‘By the way, lately she’s been hooked on baked donuts. Even living scrupulously, she’s not one to miss out on Mido’s new products. When it comes to knowledge, really it’s Hanekawa we’d want to ask—but now she’s not around.’

‘She’s not? Hanekawa-san... What happened?’

A late introduction—Hanekawa-san is Koyomi Onii-chan’s classmate and friend.

He also says she is his savior.

Nadeko has not met her many times, but even so, what little she’s seen of her was enough to make her think: “Ah, there’s something different about this person.”

Completely different.

So much so, that Nadeko had run away in fear when she first met her—Koyomi Onii-chan seems to have thought that Nadeko’s escape act that time had been due to her being shy and afraid of strangers, but however shy and afraid of strangers Nadeko may be, even she doesn’t run away upon meeting someone for the first time.

In fact, she would be scared of the consequences, so no matter how fearsome the person she is faced with is, Nadeko would probably just keep her head down and freeze.

Even fleeing is itself a decision, and is in a sense its own form of assertiveness.

It is quite beyond Nadeko.

Despite this, on that occasion—when she had run headlong, when had she run without turning back—yes.

That’s because it had been Hanekawa-san.

There had been something she had felt with her skin.

Like a kind of—strong enough to change the temperature of everything around—body heat.

The warmth of flesh.

Felt without touching, through the air—a mass of heat.

It had been like looking at a fire.

...After that, Nadeko had learned that Hanekawa-san was a very nice person, so she’s not so afraid as at that time anymore, but there’s no mistaking that she is a “different” person—so just at hearing Koyomi Onii-chan speak her name, Nadeko’s body had jumped slightly.

Asking what happened.

That had included the sense—though discourteous—that perhaps Hanekawa-san had “done something”.

‘No, it’s not particularly that anything happened. She’s just off traveling.’

‘Traveling?’

Nadeko tilted her head at the unexpected word. Travel?

‘But isn’t there school now?’

‘Yeah. But she’s taken PTO...’

‘Paid time off!?’

This was a shock.

Did high schools have such a system?

Perhaps this means the rumors about Hanekawa-san being paid to attend school had been true...? She’s a force to be reckoned with.

‘Ah, no, it wasn’t paid. She put a request in for permission for leave... And for a month, she’s gone off on a trip. Well, she wasn’t planning on going on to university or looking for a job either, so she doesn’t need to bother about her attendance, only, there’s that, but my Hanekawa’s real strait-laced, you know, so she wanted to do things by the book...’

‘Hmm... But a trip? Where did she go?’

‘Around the world.’

‘Around the world!?’

Another shock.

Only, this shock is of a different nature to the shock before—for wasn’t Hanekawa-san’s plan for after graduating, rather than university or employment, “going to see the world”?

Rumor had it that it was apparently an affinity for Oshino-san’s way of life, though Nadeko didn’t know the real intention—but?

Around the world?

‘S-She brought her... plans forward?’

‘No, no. She said that while she’s still in the clear-cut position of being a high school student, in advance of going to see the world after graduation, she’s going for a preview.’

‘Preview...’

She is indeed no mere mortal.

To think she would scout locations in advance of her world travels... It would appear Nadeko’s assessment had not been altogether mistaken.

‘It’s kind of a rehearsal too, apparently... Well, she’s got a mobile phone with her, so it’s not like we couldn’t get in touch, but I wouldn’t want to give her something to worry about when she’s abroad, you know.’

‘.....’

Koyomi Onii-chan's consideration toward Hanekawa-san, feels a little different from reticence—usually though, he's keen to call Hanekawa-san even without a reason.

Perhaps it is even that when he does have a reason, that is when he does not want to call.

It's a strange way of keeping a distance.

'So... night?'

'Yeah. Wait after you get home—I'll call you. Let's see... Since it's around 10 p.m. that Shinobu wakes... Expect it to be around then.'

'...Yep... Got it.'

Nadeko agrees to Koyomi Onii-chan's arrangement.

Tonight, 10 o'clock. Naturally she had no prior plans.

There was something on TV she wanted to watch, but it'll be recorded to HDD, so it's fine.

'If there's anything before then, call me any time—I don't think there's much I can do, but I can at least be there with you.'

With her.

Would that mean beside her?

'Yep... Thank you. It's probably fine though.'

If Koyomi Onii-chan is going to help her, a snake is nothing to be afraid of.

And besides, she just needs to be careful of gaps and shadows, and worst comes to worst, she'll only get a "shock".

'So, tonight at 10 o'clock. Nadeko's looking forward to it.'

'Ah?'

At that.

Koyomi Onii-chan's voice lowered.

Ah, thinks Nadeko too.

But with quite a different meaning and tone.

Drat. A slip of the tongue.

'Oi, Sengoku—you okay? Looking forward to it...? What're you saying? Aren't you in trouble?'

'...Um.'

She goes quiet.

She's not sure what to say.

She's not sure—what she can say as an excuse.

'Maybe I'd better come quickly after all? You seem confused, you know—what you just said, that's not good. Looking forward to having to talk about oddities...'

'N-No, that's not it...'

Nadeko could tell over the phone that Koyomi Onii-chan was anxious about her—Nadeko felt simply awful about that.

‘...Sorry.’

But, still not sure what to say, she can only apologize.

Apologizing when she’s tongue-tied is a habit of Nadeko’s—she’ll either clam up, or she’ll apologize.

Nadeko doesn’t know what else to do when she’s at a loss.

She’s always had to live life like that.

‘When you’re in difficulty, just apologizing to end matters really doesn’t do at all; the meaning of the expression: “If sorry were enough, we wouldn’t need the police,” is much more profound than people think.’

These are words received from the exceptional Hanekawa-san.

They were stirring words.

But Nadeko hasn’t been able to live up to them.

Just because you’ve been moved by some fine words, doesn’t mean your life will change, she supposes.

‘Sorry... Koyomi Onii-chan.’

‘No, it’s not something you need to apologize for...’

‘It’s fine. It’s nothing... A-Anyway, at night. Um, er... 10 o’clock, yep?’

‘Oi, Sengoku—’

‘The ph-phone card’s running out... Oh, there’s a noise. It’s really loud. Beep, beep it’s going.’

Click.

Nadeko put the telephone receiver down.

Her telephone card (one she got from Animate as a bonus item. Koyomi Onii-chan has lamented: “You use them!?”) emerged, more than half its credit still remaining.

What a kerfuffle.

She had escaped a tight spot... But, no, it was a mean excuse to use against Koyomi Onii-chan, who was only worrying about Nadeko because of her foolhardy slip of the tongue. And of all the ways of getting out of that tight spot, she could hardly conceive of one worse.

‘.....’

Nevertheless, it was a slip of the tongue.

Enough of a slip to tie it.

That she would be looking forward to it—that may have been her real feelings coming tumbling out, but it was one thing she had certainly not to say.

Koyomi Onii-chan.

Somewhere in her heart, Nadeko was glad to be able to have an “adventure” about oddities once more, with Koyomi Onii-chan.

*To be able to be saved by Koyomi Onii-chan.*

*Had excited Nadeko.*

When she saw the white snake—that after the first time she had not been surprised, was perhaps because the emotion that she had felt foremost, more than fear or shock, had been delight.

At having something about which she could talk to Koyomi Onii-chan for advice.

She had been thinking about it for so long. She must have been waiting for just such an opportunity.

...How embarrassing. But these were her honest feelings.

Sengoku Nadeko wanted to be saved by Koyomi Onii-chan—just like that time.

‘.....’

Feeling truly ashamed at the way she was taking advantage of Koyomi Onii-chan’s kindness—feeling tight with worry about whether those emotions had been exposed to Koyomi Onii-chan.

Nadeko reaches for her telephone card.

And as she does, from behind the back of the card, once again the white snake appears—of course, this doesn’t shock her anymore, however, with some time having passed since the last one, and so caught off guard, she reflexively pulled back her hand.

In doing so, she knocks the telephone and the receiver falls off its hook—stretching and contracting, the cord bounces and wiggles about as if it too were a snake.

In the moment her attention had been taken by that, the white snake had already disappeared.

‘Ah... oh yes, Nadeko forgot to ask Koyomi Onii-chan about Ougi-san...’

While that thought springs to her mind unprompted, Nadeko takes hold of the phone receiver.

‘But... really, what could this phenomenon be?’

It’s mystifying.

With an oddity there should be some fitting reason behind it—but once again, there’s absolutely nothing that comes to mind for Nadeko—

*‘Oi, oi, ya can’t be serious, Nadeko-chan—aaan?’*

From the unhooked receiver—came that voice.

No, that can’t be right.

The telephone card has been taken out, and even if it hadn’t, the hook had already been depressed—and besides, the voice heard bore no resemblance to Koyomi Onii-chan’s.

How to put it.

It was a voice in which no trace of kindness or care was felt—only aggression and violence.

*‘Ya reckon ya ain’t done nothing?—Ain’t that the richest. Clueless brats like you are the worst pain in the arse, I tell ya—ain’t got the first idea of what yer crushing under yer feet as ya lead yer merry lives.’*

‘.....Wh-Who.....?’

Nadeko brings her face close to phone receiver and speaks into it.

Shaken terribly, Nadeko knows her voice will quaver, but she has no choice but to ask.

Against that voice—that scolding tone.

She couldn't remain silent.

‘Wh-What are you—’

But there was no reply.

What there was instead of a reply—what appeared instead of a reply—were white snakes.

A great many of them.

From inside the phone receiver, from the many small holes of the mouthpiece and speaker, looking for all the world like tokoroten noodles being extruded, emerged a mass of white snakes—

‘Ky-kyaaaaaaa!’

She screamed, naturally.

Quite apart from what any snake might be doing, in visual terms it was a spectacularly grotesque image—a scene that would unmistakably be cut from any anime adaptation.

This too, was of course an illusion.

And by the time Nadeko had moved herself clear of the telephone—they had all disappeared.

‘Come over to North White Snake Shrine, Nadeko-chan.’

With the white snakes gone, from out of the speaker came that voice.

Even though, at this distance, she should not have been able to hear it—that voice came.

What could this be?

She's not just seeing things, but hearing them too.

What could be happening to Nadeko?

Leaving Nadeko to her bewilderment, the imaginary voice continues.

‘I'll tell ya there—what ya trample over on yer way through life.’

‘.....’

‘There ain't no victims. In this world, there ain't no one who ain't a victimizer—every last one of ya, yer all a right bunch of self-absorbed bastards.’

## 007

This is something Nadeko had seen on the news the other day, but apparently there are people out there who will call the police, or call for an ambulance to take them to hospital, at the drop of a hat...

It seems that what those people desire is “being saved by people”—that is, according to the pundit, they feel they “want to be a person who will be saved by someone.”

They feel they “want to be someone who is given attention to, who is worried over, who is given help to.”

Since, in other words, being given help equals being loved and, additionally, being treated as being needed—it's apparently a state of mind in which going out of one's way to make a nuisance of oneself to others, and getting forgiveness for it after, is used as a method of getting affirmation of oneself being loved and being needed.

Apparently this is all done subconsciously.

In no way do they do it deliberately.

Only, whether deliberate or otherwise, to someone like Nadeko, it seems a very understandable thing—to someone who can't see the meaning in their own life, to someone who can't see their own self-worth, being shown concern from someone else is extremely important.

Being in this situation now in which she can seek help from Koyomi Onii-chan.

She would be lying if she said her heart didn't beat faster.

She would be lying if she said she wasn't excited, wasn't aflutter.

...Yes.

Like that time.

'.....'

Given that this is how she is, Nadeko may well indeed be self-absorbed—but she was legitimate, so didn't think she could count as a bastard.

Perhaps a bit nitpicky as a comeback?

She couldn't just wait for night.

Nadeko thinks that the right course of action to take, would be to return home from school and stay put there, waiting for the phone call from Koyomi Onii-chan.

She knows that much.

Just because she has heard a voice now, that doesn't mean the situation has changed—it's made no difference to there being "no real harm" so far.

What she sees is just seeing things.

What she hears is just hearing things.

But—what she had heard that voice say wasn't something she could just let pass.

"Victim".

One to whom harm is done.

...Nadeko had no intention of thinking about herself in that way—it may be true that Nadeko did have something of a persecution complex, but she did not have, however, any intention of going about thinking of herself as a victim.

Since even if you have been harmed, that doesn't have to make you a victim—necessarily.

...So, upon hearing that voice—that utterly compassionless, rough and violent voice—Nadeko could not be unmoved.

She could not be unagitated.

She could not be unmoved.

After returning home from school, she changes out of her uniform.

Into overalls and a jacket.

The overalls were borrowed from her mother, and the jacket is her father's. Nadeko is small, so they hang very loose, but this is a disguise, so this may even be for the best.

She needed to go unnoticed, was how she considered it.

Last, rather than the peaked hat she always puts on when going out, Nadeko put on a red knit hat she had bought when she went skiing.

One she could pull down deep, low over her eyes.

Nadeko straps on a waist pouch she uses for outings, fills it with various items, changes her shoes too for outdoor loafers different from what she normally wears, and leaves the house.

And she headed for the mountain.

Crowned by North White Snake Shrine, where she had been reunited with Koyomi Onii-chan—the mountain.

Since Nadeko doesn't have a bicycle, it is briskly by foot that she goes—the journey there takes around half an hour. From here to the summit should take her about another half an hour.

For Nadeko and her little stamina, it is quite the slog.

She couldn't make a passion of mountaineering.

Only, while she may be climbing a mountain, it is only a case of going straight up a single path, properly laid with steps (albeit old)—so even if she has to take rests, it will take time, but she will eventually arrive.

At the summit. At that place.

...Yes, just as a person, within one's life, just by living, will eventually arrive at the truth.

She will arrive.

That was the way she felt—when she somehow, in actuality, came to reach North White Snake Shrine at the summit, that was the way Nadeko's mood felt.

In June, when she had gone up the mountain many times, Nadeko's body had had a "snake" bound tightly around it—so in comparison to then, this could be said to be a relatively easy journey.

But when she arrived at the summit.

Nadeko—went limp.

Having made the climb for the first time in a while, she hadn't exactly felt out of practice, but she certainly hasn't the reserves to feel like she's missed it either.

'.....'

No, maybe not "limp".

Call it dumbstruck, perhaps.

At that sight—Nadeko was struck dumb.

When she passed through the rotted remains of the ruined torii gate, the view that presented itself to Nadeko—*was a huge number of snakes, fastened about the grounds of the shrine.*

Teeming, perhaps they should be said to be.

They are not white snakes—they are everyday, normal snakes of normal coloration. These snakes *have had their bodies cut into lengths*—and, with carving chisels, been impaled, onto the ground, onto trees, onto the shrine.

The snakes—are alive.

Despite being chopped up into pieces, they are alive and twitching—not only the heads, but the sections of body too—looking for all the world like *ikizukuri*.

Even in that audacious condition, they have not expired.

It's said a snake won't die unless its head is smashed—but these brim with a vitality beyond what could be explained with those words.

Of course, crucified like this, they would surely not be able to live on for long—sooner or later, they must surely die.

It is a horrendous scene.

Undoubtedly a no go for anime.

Nadeko doesn't know whether animal rights groups include reptiles as a target for protection, but no one would stay silent about a scene like this.

Except—Nadeko was silent.

Sengoku Nadeko remained silent.

Whenever she's faced with trouble—she goes silent.

‘...But ya ain't surprised, are ya? Like ya expected it, like ya knew what were coming, ya didn't so much as shriek.’

Abruptly, without any forewarning, she hears the imaginary voice—this time, it felt as though it were whispering directly into her ear, without coming through anything like the modern instrument of the phone's speaker.

It was as though some thing.

Some sickening thing, were coiling itself about Nadeko—were binding itself onto her.

But no.

In these grounds, what's sickening more than anything else—is Nadeko.

After all—

‘Right. After all... What wrought this nightmarish vision of hell, were none other than yerself, weren't it, Nadeko-chan?’

‘.....’

She couldn't deny it.

But involuntarily, she shakes her head.

‘N-Nadeko—’

And she says.

Against that voice—pitifully.

‘Nadeko... didn’t do th-this... much.’

‘Right. This is only an illusion—’

Just as she thinks she hears the voice say this, the scene before her eyes changes—the great mass of snakes, perhaps as many as a thousand, along with the chisels that skewered them, faded away like a “mirage”—no, it was not that all of them had disappeared.

Some alone remained.

Since they had been cut apart, she couldn’t tell how many there actually were—but by counting those heads that she could see, she judged there to be about twenty of them.

Twenty...

‘Let’s see, were it about this many? Nadeko-chan, the number that ya did in?’

*That ya did in.*

*Carved up.*

*And crucified—was it this many snakes?*

Said the illusory voice—as though to torment Nadeko.

‘This much—ya did do.’

‘.....’

She bit her lower lip.

Her hands go to her knit hat and she yanks it down further—no longer just low over her eyes, but enough to cover them completely.

She doesn’t want to see anything anymore.

But it’s no good.

It’s burned firmly into her eyes.

The scene now—and the scene in June as well.

That scene, which Nadeko had created in June—

“Staring down like that, silent, never saying anything, maybe you really can go on being a victim...”

*But I wonder whether that’ll go so well this time.”*

Whose words had those been?

That’s right—they had been Ougi-san’s words...

Ougi-san—now she thinks of it, she feels that there was something more that girl had said...

That there was something.

Staring down like that, silent, never saying anything—

‘Sn... snakes.’

‘As it happens, ya got a choice, Nadeko-chan.’

Even with her eyes covered, she hears the voice.

Aggressive, violent—utterly without any shred of consideration for Nadeko, that voice in her head can still be heard.

It may seem a strange thing to say, but in that absence of tenderness, there seemed to her to be, here and now, her foremost and only relief.

After all—

‘First option, is ya can just head back home—ya can forget about everything. I can show Nadeko-chan illusions, and I can talk to ya like this—but that’s it. Like ya told that Koyomi Onii-chan, there ain’t been no real harm. Ain’t no real harm, so ain’t no harm been done. So ya can go back home and there ain’t no real problem.’

‘.....’

‘Nah, see, ya really can choose this first option, right? I ain’t got no mind to threaten Nadeko-char into doing anything. Ain’t gonna force ya, and I can’t. That’s the position I’m in. Why, by rights I ought to be urging ya to pick this first option—’

‘.....’

‘Say something, why don’t ya?’

The voice says, irritated by Nadeko’s deep silence.

But even so, Nadeko can’t say anything.

She thinks she hears a click of a tongue.

Umm...

Was *a snake’s tongue*—anatomically, able to make a click?

‘The second option—is the path of *atonement*.’

‘.....’

‘If Nadeko-chan happens to want to choose the first option, then just go back through that gate, and right back down those steps—and then ya don’t have to, and ya mustn’t ever, come back to these grounds. Ya can turn yer back on my kin ya murdered, and just don’t ever look back again—but.’

That voice.

Somehow, she felt it was grinning.

‘If ya feel ya want to atone for *these sins*, I’ll give ya a chance—uncover yer eyes, *and look here.*’

Here...?

If she confesses.

It was not with any laudable thought of wanting to atone that she took off her knit hat—only, reflexively, no, mechanically, she simply reacted to those words.

Nadeko isn’t a good kid.

She thinks of nothing but herself.

But—precisely because she thinks of nothing but herself, here, she could not but look.

Before her. Ahead of her.

At the voice's—form.

'Hyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa—aaaaaaaaaaaaa!'

This was the biggest scream so far.

The biggest scream of her life.

Great enough to send her backward.

Never mind falling onto her backside, it was enough that she might do a back flip.

Having never once managed to do one during PE, this scream might even have been big enough to propel her through a back flip.

However, *compared to the gigantic white snake, wound in coils enormous enough to engulf the grounds of the shrine*—Nadeko's scream was but a mustard seed.

It possessed a substantiality too great to be thought an illusion.

Nor was there a sense of it being frightening.

It was, how to put it, simply too large.

Only—yes. Wow, she was all she could think.

She supposes, what this comes down to, is that Nadeko was a child who could only think childishly.

'Ya looked here, didn't ya? Ya looked at this serpent.'

That giant snake—Serpent-san speaks.

'Which means, yer also my kin now—means we're partners. And I'll have ya atone, Nadeko-chan.'

## 008

It seems Nadeko had taken the wrong meaning from Serpent-san's statement that there are no victims—no, perhaps she ought to say that she had interpreted it so as to suit herself.

That a victim will also bear some culpability for the causes of an incident, or that one may happen be the injured party on one occasion, but through a single mistake, anyone can make a victim of someone else—it was with those sorts of oft heard meanings, that she had chosen to interpret it.

Chosen to interpret it to suit herself.

But it was otherwise.

That wasn't what it had meant.

More plainly, directly, simply, easily.

Straightforwardly, it meant exactly what had been said.

Sengoku Nadeko—was guilty of "mass-murder".

She was, in a typical sense, a victimizer.

There was no need to spin that meaning.

That June four months ago—back when so many middle school students had been bitten by the “charms” that Kaiki Deishuu-san had spread about.

It was in the midst of that period.

A boy had confessed to Nadeko.

Not a confession in the sense of the kind of admission that Nadeko is about to make, but in the sense of telling someone “I want to go out with you” or “I love you.”

He was in the baseball club.

Nadeko doesn’t remember his name. She’s forgotten.

Or perhaps she may not even have heard it in the first place—Nadeko thinks he may not have told her what his name was.

Perhaps he assumed it was only natural that she would know him—it may be hard to believe, but among the popular students of the sporting clubs, such people are apparently not all that uncommon.

The sort who are convinced of their own fame.

But Nadeko had no interest whatsoever in sports, and besides that, she didn’t want to go out or be lovers or any such thing—so she turned him down.

She wasn’t going to date someone she didn’t know.

And Nadeko—already had someone she loved.

However, this invited trouble—the fact that Nadeko had “dumped” that popular boy called forth resentment.

You’re quite right! Nadeko had wanted to declare.

When they wondered at why he would have asked her, of all girls, to go out with him, Nadeko had well understood their feelings and concurred entirely—no, probably, that boy had had some kind of misunderstanding, she thought. He must have had the wrong person.

But it seemed the only one who had realized this “truth” of the matter, had been Nadeko herself—the most painful part of it, was that Nadeko’s best friend did not apprehend this.

The friendship ended. Sadly.

However, that Nadeko had been thinking throughout the time they had been friends, that a good kid like her would eventually end the friendship, and so it wasn’t a surprise when it came, is also how Nadeko actually, really felt about it.

How she really felt?

It might also be said to be putting a brave face on it.

Well, let Nadeko wear that face, please.

According to what other classmates had been saying afterward (or rather, it might be more correct to refer to the emotions widely “exposed” as a result of Kaiki Deishuu-san’s “charms”), supposedly it was with the aim of going out with that boy from the baseball club that the girl had become friends

with Nadeko—so, well, there seems to have been a bit more going on behind the scenes, but now it's all a mystery.

The truth is shrouded in darkness—no, shrouded in rumor.

What was the truth of the matter, no one can know for sure anymore.

It's in the past.

The game of love.

In this, everyone seems a little bit hapless—um, well, the more is said about that matter, all the more of a puzzle it will become, so moving on.

That friend, at the point of ending the friendship, had said: “I’ve put a curse on you.”

Curse, in this instance, refers to one of Kaiki Deishuu-san’s “charms”, and the one put on Nadeko by that girl had been a snake curse.

Apparently there had been quite a number of variations.

Not just snakes, but things like bees or frogs, and even, at the more peculiar end, lobsters—what would a lobster curse do?

Perhaps break your back?

Anyway, Nadeko had swallowed those spite filled words—though they really had been no more than only spite.

That girl was not wicked, let alone a witch.

But Nadeko had started going to a bookstore, researching a method of dispelling that “charm” that had been put on her—in fact, what had apparently been the “right” thing to do, was to have found Kaiki-san, who had been somewhere in the town, and paid him to lift it—but unfortunately Nadeko was rather poorly informed in regards to rumors (it wasn’t to be until the summer vacation that Nadeko learned of Kaiki-san’s existence. At the time, she had had no idea that the charms were being “artificially” popularized) and even if she had known, asking help of a stranger would have been too difficult for Nadeko.

So, Nadeko did her best to lift the curse through self-study. This backfired and managed to put the curse into effect—a curse which had only been for show and ought really to never have become active (which is why, having learned her lesson from that, this time she sought Koyomi Onii-chan’s help from the start), but leaving that aside for now.

The method Nadeko used then to remove the curse—was to cut wild snakes into five equal parts and, following a procedure, nail them up on a tree trunk.

Nadeko had got snakes.

And using carving chisels—chopped them up.

And then using those chisels as a substitute for six inch nails, she had taken those snake parts, and hammered them up onto trees.

For about a week, she had continued that “massacre”.

It was a means of curse removal conforming to proper procedure.

However, the longer she had continued it, the more the curse grew ever stronger, and an unseen snake constricted Nadeko's body with ever greater force—if Koyomi Onii-chan hadn't found Nadeko, she would now surely...

‘Now surely, what?—Aaan? Nadeko-chan, wouldn't ya have just gone on slaughtering more and more snakes?’

‘.....’

Against the words of the gigantic white snake—Serpent-san's words, Nadeko could say nothing back.

Yes.

Nadeko, at that time, had been no victim.

After all, if Nadeko had done nothing—Nadeko would have been done no harm. And even if that were not so.

To all the snakes that Nadeko had killed.

That Nadeko had sacrificed, just to save herself—

To those tens of lives.

Sengoku Nadeko is nothing but a victimizer.

‘Nah, nah, what's with all that then? If anything I'm even impressed by ya—when ya had been killing so many snakes as a sacrifice, pointlessly killing at that, and with a face like ya ain't done nothing, crying Koyomi Onii-chan, Koyomi Onii-chan, ya made out that ya were the victim—that ain't no ordinary nerve, ya see.’

‘.....’

‘If ya really have forgotten, I don't mind jogging yer memory—remind Nadeko-chan how it was ya killed my kin. Show ya what it were like when ya sought out those snakes from the bushes, coolly and bravely grabbed their heads, then cut them to pieces with chisels—’

‘St... stop.’

Nadeko said, at last managing to speak.

While remembering how the shaking of her hands had felt.

How distant it had been from “bravery”.

‘N-Nadeko remembers it...’

‘Hehh? Ya remember it, do ya?’

‘B-But that... couldn't be helped...’

‘Couldn't be helped? Right, that friend who put the curse on Nadeko-chan would probably say the same thing, I reckon—that putting that curse on Nadeko-chan just “couldn't be helped.”’

Serpent-san says, sniggering scornfully.

What with him being a snake—and with being so enormous—no expression could be read, but from that voice, only ill will could be felt.

Just plain.

Ill will.

Found anywhere and everywhere.

“Ohhh, but it couldn’t be helped”—simple as that, everyone tosses their morals away. Yer all infants, brats, and a bunch of inveterate simpletons.’

‘...But Nadeko...’

‘People, they don’t know what they’re trampling on as they live—everyone and anyone, reckons what they’re stepping on is the ground. But it ain’t, is it? That ain’t the ground they’re treading on, but it may be ants, or it may be caterpillars, and it might even be snakes, ya see.’

‘!!’

Upon this, Nadeko shifted her feet from the spot she stood.

For at some point—Nadeko had been treading on white snakes. No, that’s not true—it was an illusion, and she had not been treading on anything.

But it just happened to be an illusion this time.

Humans are always. Nadeko is always.

Trampling on something.

‘Nah, nah, nah, Nadeko-chan, I don’t want ya to get me wrong, but I ain’t out to have a go at ya for i—unlike meself, living beings have to sacrifice other life for the sake of living, ya see. Call it original sin, call it karma or call it inherent nature, right?’

‘.....’

‘Though, there’s a real big difference between Nadeko-chan hacking those snakes up, and eating yer dinner every day, ain’t there? ’Cause them snakes Nadeko-chan killed—in getting killed, having their lives offered up—those snakes didn’t amount to doing any good for Nadeko-chan, did they? Die like a dog—it’s an odd turn of phrase to use of snakes, but they didn’t even get that sort of wasteful death. ’Cause by them dying, the bind Nadeko-chan were in, were only made tighter—aaan?’

‘.....’

‘Nah, but so what? Thanks to all that, Nadeko-chan got to be reunited with Koyomi Onii-chan, so then I reckon that means they—my kin ya murdered—did ya some good after all, right?’

‘St-Stop, just stop.’

Nadeko says.

Covering her ears with both hands—but doing this couldn’t block the voice inside her head.

Yes.

By now, even should she shut her eyes—she would surely see it still.

Those gigantic coils, there before her, encircling the shrine.

‘Wh... what? What do you think y-you know about Koyomi Onii-chan? ...To Nadeko, h-he, he is—’

‘Nahh—when it comes to Koyomi Onii-chan, I know a fair old lot—well, not that that matters ’Cause at issue here, is what Nadeko-chan’s done.’

What Nadeko had “done”.

The mistake that she had made. That she had clean forgotten.

That she hadn’t so much as bothered to bring to mind—her original sin.

‘Y-You... w-want an apology? Is an apology wh-what you want? You called N-Nadeko out here... Used il-illusions to drive Nadeko... A-Atonement? What...’

Desperately she puts words together.

If she stopped talking, it seemed like Serpent-san would never cease tormenting Nadeko—so, for now, she forces together a string of words.

‘What does Nadeko... have to do?’

‘What do ya have to do, huh?’

Oh-hoh, chuckles Serpent-san.

Baring his fangs.

‘Usually, times like this are when ya’d beg forgiveness—that ya ain’t said one word of “please forgive me” is something real special.’

‘.....’

‘Ya reckon ya made a mistake, but ya don’t reckon ya did wrong? Is that how it is? ’Cause it “couldn’t be helped”? Well, that ain’t no surprise. From where good old humans stand, in the end, snakes ain’t no more than reptiles—right?’

‘...N-Nadeko d-doesn’t...’

‘Never mind.’

Serpent-san cut short Nadeko’s attempt to plead.

‘Might be I oughtn’t have put it in a roundabout way like atonement—been a while since I spoke to a human, so I ain’t got the knack of it. My bad, my bad—I’m sorry, aaan?’

Instead, she was apologized to by Serpent-san—though in that wording, nothing resembling sincerity could be felt.

Rather, it seemed to her that he was, from the depths of his heart, mocking puny Nadeko—if it is going too far to call it mocking, it felt at least that he was only, yes, “humoring” her.

‘It’s nothing—I’ve a favor to ask. Of Nadeko-chan. If it might just ease Nadeko-chan’s mind a bit about that score of my kin ya killed—I’ve got just a little tiny favor I’d like to ask of ya.’

‘A favor...’

‘Right, or maybe Nadeko-chan wants me to put it like this?’

Serpent-san.

The great white snake—that head that ought to be expressionless, opened its mouth wide—and playfully, winked.

This did nothing at all to make him cute.

‘Help me, Nadeko-chan.’

‘.....’

It was an impossible request, she thought.

But turning it down was even more impossible.

‘O—Okay.’

Nadeko says.

With her ears covered. With her eyes cast down.

Nadeko says.

‘If... If it’s only little.’

But thinking back, the conclusion of this story must already have been decided by this point—even if, at that time, she had known what Serpent-san was going to make Nadeko do, even if she had known what Serpent-san was going to do with Nadeko—even knowing the truth and the truth, Nadeko would surely have agreed just the same, and so, she believes, her fate would not have changed.

As such a story, is nothing but a story.

Her future spent killing Koyomi Onii-chan.

Tick by tock, draws ever closer.

## 009

‘Oh?—So you’ve stopped seeing them? Those white snakes.’

‘Y-Yep... It’s fine now. Th-Thinking about it now—like that white snake from the shoe rack, or that white snake from inside the desk—Nadeko probably just imagined it all.’

‘A mad jinn did it? Well, so it was an oddity then.’

‘N-No. Imagined it.’

‘I see... If that’s the case, that’s good...’

‘Y-Yep. So it’s good. It’s the greatest.’

Night.

Shortly after Nadeko had returned home, at 10 o’clock precisely, a phone call from Koyomi Onii-chan had come—exactly as promised.

Not even a second off.

In contrast to his reputation for frequent tardiness, this is a surprisingly “punctual” Koyomi Onii-chan.

‘S-Sorry, for troubling you like that... It was an overreaction. Th-That’s no good, is it? Blaming every little thing on oddities...’

‘...Well, that’s true, I guess—hmm. Wait a sec. Shinobu’s right here...’

Saying this, Koyomi Onii-chan seemed to move his phone away from his ear. But his phone being apparently sensitive, the sound is still, just barely, picked up.

“Sengoku’s saying she imagined it—but, Shinobu, what do you think?”

“Imaginings are in and of themselves much the same manner of thing as oddities—hmm. However, ‘tis that Forelock Girl, so—well, if that be the case, then it may be well. Leave it rest.”

“Really? I’d have thought what with what happened last time, we could never be too careful. Just in case, it might be best to meet up with her and ask in person, don’t you think?”

“I do not. Not at all, do I so think. Not the slightest. If the girl herself says ‘tis well, delve into the matter no further. From the first, was it not said the danger was slight?”

“Yeah, that’s true... but...”

They seemed to be in the midst of a consultation.

In this case Nadeko had to reluctantly support, not Koyomi Onii-chan, but Shinobu-san.

Hooray, hooray, Shinobu-san.

‘All right, Sengoku.’

After a bit, Koyomi Onii-chan returned.

‘If that’s the case, well, let’s leave it at that. All’s well that ends well. But if it turns out that it was your imagination that you had imagined it, and it might be an oddity after all, you have to get in touch, okay?’

‘Y-Yep, okay... T-Th-Thank you, Koyomi Onii-chan.’

Saying this, Nadeko hung up.

Normally, having gotten a call from Koyomi Onii-chan, she would have liked to have enjoyed it longer, but she knew these weren’t the circumstances for that.

After putting the receiver down, just as she had a moment to breathe:

‘Sha! Sha! Sha!’

Went a voice from Nadeko’s right hand.

More accurately, from her right-hand wrist.

A white snake is bound, like a bracelet, around Nadeko’s wrist—no, to give an analogy based on its thickness, it is like a scrunchie.

But in actuality it is neither a bracelet nor a scrunchie.

In actuality—the white snake, is a white snake.

It is Serpent-san.

He just looks plumped up, because his scales are standing on end.

‘Ya lied to yer beloved Koyomi Onii-chan, didn’t ya—fine with that, are ya? It’s like yer piling on misdeeds to hide yer misdeeds, ain’t it—ya carry on like that, one day yer life will come a cropper, aaan?’

‘...D-Don’t talk too loud.’

Nadeko, grasping her wrist and taking care not to be noticed by her mother and father in the living room, snuck upstairs.

Then she went into her own room and locked the door.

Now, she could relax a bit.

She sighs in relief.

‘Ain’t no real need to sneak around—the only one who can hear my voice is Nadeko-chan.’

‘.....’

She knows that.

But even knowing that, she would rather avoid being seen in conversation with Serpent-san—even if Serpent-san’s voice couldn’t be heard, Nadeko’s reactions to it would be loud and clear.

What’s more.

Serpent-san’s form—shrunk down to the size of a scrunchie on her wrist—would be visible to anyone.

‘...If you can make yourself that small, why did you appear to begin with, large enough to envelop the whole shrine...?’

When she put that simple question to him, Serpent-san, after laughing ‘Sha! Sha! Sha!’ said:

‘Staging. That’s staging—the staging of the introduction scene. Us oddities got to have humans shocked or we lose the meaning of our existence.’

An oddity that surprises.

That was what Koyomi Onii-chan had spoken about.

‘...How large are you really?’

‘I ain’t got no size. All I’ve got—all I am is a concept.’

‘Concept...’

What came to her mind upon hearing that, was math she had learned in the 1st year.

That a straight line is not an existence, but a concept.

That it has neither length nor width.

That in the case where length is specified, it’s not called a straight line, but a line segment—a straight line is, always, a line that passes straight through two points—its length is said to be infinite, and its width is said to be zero.

She didn’t really understand it.

What on Earth had that teacher been talking about?

Had he even known himself what he had been trying to say?

Quite what a half line was supposed to be, she’ll never know—only, she thought that what she had been told about straight lines, seemed to tally with what Serpent-san was talking about now.

The point was, that it was an existence only inside people’s heads, for the sake of explaining an explanation.

‘Now, anyone can see me bound like this on Nadeko-chan’s wrist, but that’s only thanks to Nadeko-chan being aware that this is what everyone sees as me, and it ain’t no more than that—well, to expand on that a bit, this is me in a state of possessing Nadeko-chan.’

‘Possessing…’

Possession?

Wouldn’t that be quite serious?

Kanbaru-san’s left arm—was that some other condition, different from possession, or wasn’t it?

‘Well, don’t mind that. Ain’t nothing—just a temporary thing anyway. Ya only got to put up with it until ya got this job done—Sha! Sha!’

He seems in high spirits.

It appeared, somewhat, that he might be happy at having acquired a physical body—but then again, is feeling happy something oddities do?

Ah, but Shinobu-san is reputed to dance with joy when presented with donuts.

Who knows?

Nadeko sighs, and lets herself drop upon a cushion laid in the middle of her room. It’s a touch slovenly, but she’s tired.

Not tired at having lied to Koyomi Onii-chan—it is not as though Nadeko is especially an honest person, so she has been known to tell lies.

Like everyone does.

Nor would this have been the first time she time has lied to Koyomi Onii-chan... Neither is it that she’s tired from having gone up the mountain.

She feels no... not that much physical fatigue.

Her tiredness, is a tiredness regarding the future.

When she thinks of what’s to come, it feels a little to her as though she might never be free of this “wearisomeness”...

‘Mm.’

But she couldn’t stay forever doing nothing like this—if she doesn’t move things on, Nadeko would be left forever having to wear this distasteful scrunchie.

‘Distasteful’s a bit harsh, ain’t it?—Aaan?’

‘...You can read Nadeko’s mind? That wasn’t... said out loud, just then.’

‘Nah, I just inferred from yer expression—being stared at with that kind of loathing, anyone’d think the same. Well, of course, there’s also that me and Nadeko-chan are spiritually linked now, so those sorts of guesses are easier to get right.’

‘.....’

When she had thought her mind may have been read, she had quite naturally felt “Oh, no”—but upon learning that he couldn’t, she found herself a little letdown.

If Serpent-san were a mind-reader, it would be nice and easy not having to talk, was her reason for

thinking such a thing, however...

‘S-Sooo—Serpent-san?’

‘Serpent-san, huh?—I’d rather have ya say Serpent-sama, really, but, well, expecting veneration from a lass who can’t tell right from left, may be a pipe dream. What is it, Nadeko-chan?’

‘...Wh-What should Nadeko do?’

Atonement.

Or, a favor.

The particulars of this—Nadeko had yet to hear.

At the shrine, no sooner had Nadeko consented than Serpent-san had, before her eyes, shrunken that gigantic body down—and bound himself onto Nadeko’s wrist.

Then, declaring: “I’ll tell ya the details at night. For now, I’m out of power,” he had gone straight to sleep.

Apparently, in showing Nadeko visions and making her hear voices, Serpent-san had seemingly expended much of the energy he had held—so, at a loss as to what she could do otherwise, Nadeko had, in the end, gone back home.

Not long after she had got back in, Serpent-san had awoken, but it had been before she could hear any more of what he had to say, that the call from Koyomi Onii-chan had come.

‘Wh-wh-wh-wh...’

She struggles to speak—but gathers her courage.

This was something she could not avoid.

‘Wh-What sort of lewd thing does Nadeko... have to do?’

‘What the blazes!’

A tsukkomi from an oddity.

At the fangs bared tsukkomi, Nadeko fell back against her cushion.

As tsukkomi go, this was altogether too frightening.

‘How did ya come to that idea, Nadeko-chan?—I dread to think.’

‘Th-That’s not it? B-But snakes, in psychoanalysis, as a sexual motif—’

‘Don’t ya go lumping me in with that sort of populist notion, Nadeko-chan—for pity’s sake, taken too much of an influence from that Koyomi Onii-chan and that Kanbaru-san, ain’t ya, aaan?’

‘.....’

She has no words.

It’s as embarrassing as can be. How very awkward.

‘S-Sooo, Nadeko... doesn’t need to take any clothes off, then? No need to put on a school swimsuit or put on bloomers, then?’

‘Nah, it ain’t any of that sort of thing.’

‘Oh...’

What a relief.

She could almost hear the voice of Kanbaru-san's disappointment though.

'.....? B-But how does Serpent-san know about Kanbaru-san?'

'Cause I do. Like I told ya, I know about Kanbaru-san, and about Koyomi Onii-chan—aaan?'

'Th-Then you are reading Nadeko's mind...'

'I'm telling ya, I can't.'

'Reading Nadeko's aura?'

'It ain't like that.'

'Nadeko's corona?'

'Ain't that either.'

'S-Sooo, reading Nadeko's CoroCoro?'

'Why is a second-year middle school student reading a manga magazine for little kids?'

What's the problem with that?

It's pretty good.

'I told ya, I ain't reading yer mind. It's simply that I *were watching*—that day, when the three of ya performed that ritual at the shrine.'

'...S-Sooo, do you live at that shrine?'

Is that what it would be?

So then, he would know about Koyomi Onii-chan and Kanbaru-san—and about the “mass-murder” Nadeko conducted at the shrine.

But in that case...

Huh? Would that mean...

'A-Are you the... “thing” of that shrine?'

'Don't tell me yer only just cottoning on, Nadeko-chan—it ain't like it ain't something ya can't figure out from the shrine's name.'

'The shrine's name...? Wasn't it North White Snake Shrine...? Is there something about that?'

'Is there something...? When ya look at me, a white snake, it don't come to ya? A bit slow, ain't ya, Nadeko-chan?'

'.....'

Certainly, Nadeko was slow, so she couldn't refute that.

Eh? But then, that means...

So, if that were the case, then wouldn't that mean Serpent-san would be much more “important” than Nadeko had even imagined?

'Serpent-san... Are you the person... the snake “worshiped”, at that shrine?'

'Can't quite say that's the way it is—that shrine lost its faith a great long time ago. Now it's only a *haunt where bad things drift*—nah, might be more right to call it a dump where they get swept.'

‘...Oh, yes, someone might have mentioned something like that...’

Someone else had said something about it being, as a location, still functioning, but that it was no longer a shrine to a god—since it was a complicated story, she had forgotten about it. Or it would be more honest to say that since it was a complicated story, she had ignored it in the first place.

‘S-Sooo—but, so, then you are important. Ah... Your Good Graciousness is important.’

‘Ain’t no point trying to get formal now—anyway, I ain’t important anymore, and I don’t mind if ya talk to me casually. Let’s me and Nadeko-chan be equal partners, right?’

‘Partners...’

He had said that earlier, hadn’t he—that word.

That word to express a relationship.

‘Well, we ain’t friends, right? Mutually.’

‘.....’

She wouldn’t disagree.

But even if she’s told she doesn’t need to be formal, the reality is it’s still rather daunting—after all, what living in a shrine would mean, is that Serpent-san would be (though he really doesn’t look like it) a god.

He’s a god. A god.

...Huh?

She had a feeling Oshino-san had said something, at some point, about how all of the concepts known as oddities are—*something like* gods.

No, not only that, but even, taken to its furthest extent, that everything apart from humans, all existences and all concepts, were gods—“yaoyorozu no kami”—the myriad gods of Shinto.

That they were pervasive.

Was what he had told her.

But even then—even if they are pervasive, not paying respect to an outright god is a strange thing—only, well, regardless of whoever Nadeko talks to, formally or informally, she can’t manage to speak in a manner that won’t lead to offense anyway.

At least, if the man (the snake) himself says she can talk to him as an equal, then she supposes it must be fine.

So Nadeko, with an ‘Err...’ starts again.

‘Well, then Serpent-san... If it’s not something lewd, then what does Nadeko have to do? There isn’t anything that Nadeko can do, beside that.’

‘...At that difficult age when yer full of curiosity, ain’t ya, Nadeko-chan... And self-shaming, to boot.’

Serpent-san, as though confounded, lifted his head from Nadeko’s wrist (though Nadeko doesn’t think Serpent-san, whether he be happy or sad, has any gesture he can make other than lifting his head) and let out his tongue.

Though it does also make him look like he's blowing a raspberry.

'But I will have ya do something beside that for me—frankly, I ain't got no one but Nadeko-chan to rely on. I'll lay it out clear for ya at the start—I'm taking advantage of Nadeko's weakness, capitalizing on vulnerability and exploiting vice, to get ya to do me a favor. That's how far I'm willing to go to get ya to do what I want of ya.'

'.....'

'Ain't any reaction, huh—hmm, expected that much from the outset, did ya? I see, I see—so ya ain't as slow-witted a girl as ya look, then.'

'...N-Nadeko is...'

She stammers.

'S-Slow... Sh-She's... dull.'

'I wonder about that. Well, forget it—I'll tell ya what I want then. Sha! Sha! Sha! A god asking something of a human—ain't these strange times indeed.'

'.....'

'What I want Nadeko-chan to do is—'

*Find something*—he said.

There alone Serpent-san spoke, neither aggressively nor violently, but with a somber directness.

Somber? No.

Solemn—perhaps it would be better to put it.

'I want Nadeko-chan to find my corpse.'

## 010

The next morning, Nadeko headed for school the same as always.

Yes, indeed, whether one sees illusions, or is possessed by a god, to school one must go—that is a middle school student.

Wake in the morning, put on the uniform, make the school commute.

The exemplary middle school life.

The single element that is not the same as always, is the white scrunchie wrapped around her right wrist—that Nadeko will have to claim this is her sense of fashion, is a sore point.

'S-Say, Serpent-san... clinging to Nadeko's wrist is one thing... never mind that anymore, but can't you become invisible to people except Nadeko?'

'It ain't that I can't, but I don't want to waste any more power—right now, by borrowing Nadeko-chan's body, I'm taking it easy.'

‘Easy...?’

‘Don’t sweat it, ain’t like my voice can be heard—and while at school, I’ll make like I’m just an accessory for ya. I ain’t out to invade yer ordinary life.’

‘.....’

Nadeko wanted to tell him that he might be confiscated by a teacher, but... But she lost any confidence in being able to explain this properly, so left the conversation there.

Well, it would only mean Nadeko would get told off.

She considers too that she wouldn’t feel it mattered much, if he were confiscated.

That whatever happened, things would pan out somehow, is her feeling.

It was with these thoughts that she arrived at school. She changes her footwear at the shoe rack—of course, no white snakes would come crawling out from there anymore.

Those illusions had been a message Serpent-san had sent Nadeko—now that they could communicate directly, there was no reason for Serpent-san to use those messengers.

Serpent-san had apparently “mustered the last” of his power to send Nadeko those messages—

‘Hey. Hey, Nadeko-chan—why’d ya change yer shoes? Why do ya need to do that?’

‘...Who knows? Never thought about it before, but it’s to Keep The School Tidy... Um, don’t talk will you?’

‘Right, I know—ain’t no need to insist, I tell ya. I’m real taciturn me, anyway. Same as Nadeko-chan.’

‘.....’

Scarcely believable. Will Serpent-san really pretend to just be an accessory...?

Upon entering her classroom, Nadeko’s classmates’ reactions to her were the same as always—and just like always, Nadeko goes to her seat.

‘School, huh—well, back at the shrine too, there used to be similar educational activities, ya know.’

‘.....’

Talk about predictable.

Even with other people around to see, Serpent-san was not about to stay quiet.

In theory, so far as not moving from being bound around her wrist was concerned, he seemed to be following through on his pretense of being “just an accessory”, but it would be hard to make the case that he was being entirely true to his word.

‘Unnaturally regimented—gives me the shivers. Or, nah, is this unique to this class? Somehow, it’s like yer all mutually keeping check, all tense—how can I put it—’

‘.....’

Nadeko stood from her seat.

Then exited the class. And then, crossing the hall and ascending the stairs, she moved all the way to before the door on the top floor—the door to the roof, which they weren’t allowed to use.

‘Ahem, Serpent-san.’

‘What?’

‘Be quiet.’

She pleaded earnestly. This is the first time in her life that she had asked a person to do something so bluntly.

Though he’s not a person, but a snake. And a god.

But even for Hatsumode, for any New Year’s shrine visit of any year of her life, she would not ever have asked for anything so seriously as she did now.

‘Sha! Sha!—Sorry about that. Looks like it were a lie when I said I were taciturn.’

‘You’re altogether quick in taking your words back...’

But it is not as though she had believed him.

But just because she didn’t believe him, doesn’t mean she can “condone” his flippancy... If anything his frankness even provokes “indignation”.

‘Look, Serpent-san?’

‘What?’

‘You’ve probably realized this, but Nadeko’s a quiet kid.’

‘Quiet kid?’

‘A quiet, shy, calm kid.’

‘Sounds like the sort of kid who might be anywhere without ya knowing.’

‘Yes. The sort of kid who might be anywhere without you knowing—that’s Nadeko.’

Nadeko, who is talking in a whisper to her wrist.

...To say what the problem is, the problem is this composition—that which is, right now on these stairs with no people around, currently acceptable.

This picture is a grave problem.

‘If a kid like that, who might be anywhere without you knowing, were to be seen talking to her own wrist, what do you think all her classmates would think?’

‘What’d they think?’

“‘Poor kid’ they’d think.”

It would be a class upgrade from a quiet kid to a pitiable kid—no, perhaps better to swallow pride and call it a class downgrade.

If that were to happen within the current state of her class, the sight would be unbearable.

‘Really? I don’t reckon it’d make much odds—what’d be different, if yer position were to change some?’

‘.....’

What would be different? Nadeko’s position...

‘Ya don’t talk to anyone in the first place, so it’s all the same however yer thought—if ya ain’t ever

gonna chat to someone, whatever they think of ya, it's the same, right? I ain't wrong, am I?'

'.....'

Um? Huh, is that right?

Somehow it almost seems persuasive, but she also somewhat feels she's being mislead... She couldn't think that a god would cheat a person, but precisely by virtue of being a god, he might be able to do as he pleases with people's feelings.

And supposedly he does tell lies.

And take advantage of weakness...

'A-Anyway, Serpent-san.'

'Hm? Oi, oi, Nadeko-chan. Ya ain't gone through life using words like "anyway" or "enough about that" to just change the subject, have ya? Without any real discussion? Neither accepting what I'm saying nor arguing against, not even giving it some consideration—just shelving it? That ain't Nadeko-chan's way of dealing with life, is it?'

'...Anyway.'

Nadeko's way of dealing with life.

That is: with her eyes downcast, keep quiet.

And wait—for the other person to go.

'The promise was that the daytime would be when Nadeko was free... That the daytime would be when Nadeko could do the same as always... That searching for Serpent-san's body would only have to be at night...'

'It ain't like it were a promise, but, well, yeah—now that ya mention it.'

'.....'

'Nah, all right, it were a promise—yeah. I get it, I get it. That's right. If Nadeko-chan says she'll use her time at night for my sake, I ain't got a mind to make impositions. Bound about Nadeko-chan's wrist I may be, but I ain't no handcuff—'

'.....'

Yesterday night.

The "promise" made with Serpent-san had been roughly as follows:

No, perhaps that wasn't what would be called a promise—nor a deal, as in the end, Nadeko was simply going to do as Serpent-san told her.

Told: 'I want Nadeko-chan to find my corpse,' she had shivered.

She had frozen at the "macabre" word "corpse".

Searching for a corpse?

'...Wh-What's that supposed to mean? S-Serpent-san's... corpse?'

'Oi, oi, don't go talking about a corpse like it's unclean, Nadeko-chan—yer making a face like ya were an elementary school kid told ya had to clean the toilets as a punishment.'

‘Wh-Why is your analogy so specifically ordinary...?’

That’s not very god-like...

‘Sha! Sha! Sha!’ Serpent-san laughs.

‘Ain’t nothing—since I’m merged with Nadeko-chan now, even if I can’t read yer thoughts or memories, I can to an extent, pull out some of yer knowledge.’

‘...Thoughts, memories and knowledge are different...?’

She doesn’t really understand.

Perhaps it’s like Koyomi Onii-chan’s relationship with Shinobu-san, or maybe like White Hanekawa-san and Black Hanekawa-san... No, but... she thought that between Serpent-san and Nadeko, compared to those two pairs, there was an overwhelmingly hierarchical relationship.

‘Well, ain’t like children’s feelings about not wanting to clean toilets have changed since olden times either—however, Nadeko-chan, what I want to ask ya to do ain’t cleaning, but collecting litter.’

‘Collecting litter?’

‘I don’t reckon ya could call it a treasure hunt—even I ain’t about to call my own corpse treasure. Even so, humans did once worship that corpse as a god.’

‘.....?’

‘What’s called a shintai—a sacred relic. My corpse, which used to be prayed to at that shrine... But now it’s lost, ya see.’

What’s lost—is presumably not just the relic.

From that shrine, North White Snake Shrine, it’s all gone: the relic, the belief—and its power. Everything and anything.

Now, over there.

Is merely a location.

No—perhaps it ought not even be said that it was merely a location—rather, that it was only a haunt, into which things drift.

‘Right. That I can be here like this—it’s a miracle. Nah, maybe I should say it’s thanks to that vampire—Oshino Shinobu, former Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade.’

‘.....’

The arrival in this town of Shinobu-san, the King of Oddities, had drawn in many different things, besides a con artist like Kaiki Deishuu-san.

*Many bad things*—that is.

Where they had gathered particularly strongly was that ruin—that air pocket of a shrine.

Apparently it had been those “bad things” that had caused the otherwise inactive “charm” placed on Nadeko, and the “undoing” of it, to be invigorated.

Not only that.

Serpent-san—that supposedly fallen god.

Had been revived.

‘Meaning Shinobu-san is the root cause...’

Nadeko’s shoulders slumped.

She couldn’t tell this to Koyomi Onii-chan.

At least from that perspective, Nadeko’s decision to refuse his help could be seen as justified.

‘A strong power, in and of itself, can exert, for good or ill, an influence on its surroundings. Ain’t no responsibility in that—for what that’s worth, Nadeko-chan, yer making it sound like it’s someone else’s fault, but Nadeko-chan’s massacre is one of the factors behind the current situation.’

‘.....’

When it’s put to her like that, she has nothing to say for herself.

Though regardless of what’s put to her, her saying nothing isn’t new.

‘But my miraculous and heartwarming resurrection ain’t no more than a temporary thing—a short-lived miracle. A fleeting vision. Before long, I will vanish.’

Once again, said Serpent-san.

‘Right now I’m like a ghost.’

‘...A-A ghost of a g-god?’

No, the ghost of an oddity? It’s a bit knotty.

Like some illusory thing—perhaps?

‘What happened was—well, in short, *someone came and used up* nearly all the “bad things” gathered at that haunt—those “bad things” were the energy source that gave me form, but that spiritual energy got used for a right pointless exercise.’

Weren’t nothing I could do but watch from inside the shrine, said Serpent-san.

Serpent-san’s words displayed, what was for him, a rare feeling of (how to it put it?) “regret”.

She didn’t fully understand, but that someone would use up Serpent-san’s energy source, well, it goes to show there are some cruel people out there.

‘Wh-Who... would do such a thing?’

‘Nah, well, it were Shinobu-chan.’

It was Shinobu-chan. It was Shinobu-san.

The root cause and conclusion were both her.

The phrase “match-pump” comes to mind—extinguishing what oneself had lit.

‘It were due to that vampire’s own power that those “bad things” gathered there, so I ain’t gonna say she can’t do as she pleases—but that don’t change that it’s ’cause of that, that the concept which is me, has become a candle in the wind.’

‘...So to stop that candle going out... you need your corpse...?’

As a new energy source.

In order to go on living—no, saying “living” wouldn’t be quite right.

Only—to go on existing.

To pervade.

‘Well, ya ain’t wrong there. Meaning, it’s my manner of “food”—needing to feed on something for yer own sake, whether yer a god or yer a human, might not be so different after all.’

‘Food...’

‘Feeding for the sake of living. Well, in my case, I ain’t killing for the sake of living though.’

‘.....’

‘Hmm? Ya look like ya want to say something... Maybe that killing those snakes was “for the sake of living” so it “couldn’t be helped” and ya don’t reckon ya deserve blame?’

‘N-No... It’s not that... And Nadeko messed up after all... It’s just...’

‘Just what?’

‘...Nothing.’

‘Tsk.’

Serpent-san seemed irritated at Nadeko having withdrawn her words—faced with such indecisive reticence, it probably wouldn’t just be Serpent-san who would be annoyed.

‘If there’s something ya want to say, spit it out—we can’t build mutual trust otherwise.’

‘Mutual trust...’

‘Ain’t keen on building that, are ya? I’ll tell ya this though—unlike all the humans Nadeko-char dealt with until now, I ain’t gonna go away. ’Cause I’m stuck like this, tied to Nadeko-chan’s right hand.’

‘...That’s... just because Serpent-san is using Nadeko as an energy source—like a backup battery...’

‘That’s a stopgap though. Nothing changes, then it ain’t gonna stop me disappearing—that’s why, even if Nadeko-chan needs to be pushed, I’m gonna have ya find my corpse.’

‘As you can’t... look for it yourself.’

If he could, he wouldn’t be looking to Nadeko for assistance.

‘Right—I basically can’t move from the shrine.’

‘Oh...’

Thinking about it later.

Serpent-san made a mistake in speaking those words—but Nadeko took in the fact that Serpent-sar “can’t move from the shrine” without giving it any great consideration...

She ought to have thought about it.

About the reason why Serpent-san couldn’t move from the shrine.

‘So I’ll have to have Nadeko-chan help me out. With finding my corpse.’

‘C-Corpse, corpse... Can’t you stop saying that... Serpent-san? I-It’s scary, and kind o’ repulsive...’

‘I told ya, don’t go talking about a corpse like it’s scary, repulsive or filthy. Not even if it ain’t my corpse either.’

‘N-Nadeko didn’t say it was filthy...’

It was Serpent-san who compared it with cleaning toilets.

Besides, while it isn’t like she would do it out of choice, whichever role Nadeko’s assigned, she doesn’t skip on cleaning duties.

She wouldn’t want to be told off.

‘If you would call it a relic, then maybe... it’d be easier for Nadeko to talk about it.’

‘I’d be embarrassed to call my own corpse a relic—just calling it a fancy word, makes a big difference to the impression of it... Well, anyway, that’s the favor I want Nadeko-chan to do for me.’

‘.....’

Find his “corpse” so he could go on existing.

A body search, for the sake of going on pervading.

Compared to all the rigmarole gone through to summon Nadeko—it could even be said to be an exceedingly simple request.

But.

For Serpent-san this must be an imperative—there is a proverb: umisen yamasen.

It apparently refers to a snake which has lived in the seas for a thousand years and lived in the mountains for a thousand years, thereby becoming a dragon... Bits and pieces of what Serpent-san said imply he used to be a normal snake.

And that snake, upon dying, had been deified as a sacred relic at that shrine—with that time and then when the shrine lost its faith, Serpent-san would have experienced two deaths before now.

A third time.

He must not want to go through that.

‘Say, Serpent-san?’

‘What?’

‘Why did you choose Nadeko to help you?’

She had wanted to ask that.

Nadeko already knew she would have to help Serpent-san—so all the more, she had wanted to know the reason for that.

‘Nah, it ain’t like I chose ya.’

However, Serpent-san’s was no warm reply.

Not just blunt.

It was, like a snake, cold-blooded.

Though she doesn’t in fact know for certain whether snakes really are cold-blooded or not.

‘There weren’t no one but Nadeko-chan who I could turn to.’

‘.....’

From the words alone, it might have seemed as though there were some strong connection between Serpent-san and Nadeko, but somehow, rather than that—Serpent-san’s manner was more brusque.

‘It were only Nadeko-chan who I had a “channel” to, see—aaan?’

““Channel”...?”

‘I were trying to put it in a modern way, for Nadeko-chan, but calling it a “bond” is clearer to me. Having lost its faith, that shrine weren’t connected to anyone—with the exception of Nadeko-chan, who at that shrine, would ya believe, had merrily beavered away at snake killing.’

‘...An exception without wanting to be... But then, Koyomi Onii-chan and Shinobu-chan too...’

‘Koyomi Onii-chan and Shinobu-san have certainly also done a lot at the shrine—but on the point of a bond with me, it’s a bit weak. There ain’t no channel connecting them to me. Nadeko-chan directly killed my kin—my clan, which is stronger on that point. Well, even so, it took almost two months to connect the channel. It was like I were drawing in that thin bond, like it were soba.’

‘.....’

It would come down to that, wouldn’t it?

In the end—punishment for sins.

Rather than having been chosen.

It is all about atonement.

Whatever Serpent-san says—however it’s spun, for Nadeko, it’s the cleanup from that time.

The soba analogy seems an odd one though.

A thin and long one, for a snake?

‘...Dinner.’

‘Aan?’

‘Humans eat dinner, don’t they?’

‘Sure—even I ate back when I were “living”—and like I said just a little earlier, even now I need energy in order to “go on existing” and that’s what I want of Nadeko-chan.’

‘S-Serpent-san said that what Nadeko did was different from eating dinner every day, but... but isn’t it the same?’

‘? What’re ya saying? Making excuses?’

‘N-No, that’s not it...’

She couldn’t explain it properly. She couldn’t put her feelings into words.

But this.

She had tried to tell Serpent-san earlier—when she had stopped herself.

For the sake of their relationship from now on, she ought to have said it.

Even if she has to put it clumsily.

‘What Nadeko wants to say is... that there’s probably some “payback for eating”... If there is

supposed to always be punishment for sins.'

'.....'

'Nadeko thought this would be the food chain... That "things that eat something, will be eaten by something." But... once you stand at the top of the food chain, then you won't get eaten by anything.'

Nadeko spoke while thinking.

'Humans—aren't eaten by anything. They just eat and just kill... There's no punishment for the sin.'

'.....'

'When everyone says "itadakimasu", how much of a feeling of "receiving the life of another" do they put into saying it?'

'...The food chain ain't that simple a thing though, is it? It's drawn like a pyramid to make it easy to understand, but really it ought to be drawn circular. Like the Ouroboros—even humans, when ya become corpses, are prey for microbes.'

'.....'

Nadeko was silenced by that "correct" response—but, no, it wasn't what she had wanted to say.

She's not getting herself across. Neither her words, nor her feelings.

'What's up, Nadeko-chan?'

'Nothing... All right. Anyway.'

She's gone and said it. "Anyway".

'Anyway, Nadeko just has to look for Serpent-san's relic from now on—once that relic is found, you'll let Nadeko go, won't you?'

'Let ya go? ...It ain't like I'm out to pressure ya. I'm only exploiting yer sense of guilt.'

'.....'

She has a feeling that counts as pressure, but certainly, Serpent-san isn't using threats to make Nadeko conduct the search.

He is giving her room for choice.

Making her see those illusions of white snakes (via the "channel", probably), wasn't to disrupt Nadeko's daily life, but to send a message. Simply a "summons"...

'...A-Anyway...'

She repeated.

'...All right. Nadeko will look for and find Serpent-san's relic.'

'Yer my savior. But I ain't gonna thank ya.'

'.....'

Why wouldn't he?

Because he's a god?

'So, Serpent-san, where is your corpse?'

'I dunno.'

‘Is it somewhere on that mountain?’

‘I dunno.’

‘Is it in this town?’

‘I dunno.’

‘When was it lost?’

‘I dunno.’

‘About how big is it?’

‘I dunno.’

‘Is it big like you were to begin with?’

‘I dunno.’

‘Or is it small like you are now?’

‘I dunno.’

‘About how heavy is it?’

‘I dunno.’

‘Is it like bones? Or is it like a mummy?’

‘I dunno.’

‘About how old is it?’

‘I dunno.’

‘Righto!’

All smiles, Nadeko slapped her thigh.

‘With all this information, it’s practically found already... What da hell!?’

Nadeko gave a tsukkomi.

A delayed reaction tsukkomi. Rarely does even Koyomi Onii-chan use one.

That it was in Kansai dialect, only makes it the more painful.

‘Th-There’s no way it can be found like this... Isn’t that basically saying nothing is known?’

‘Well, ya could put it that way.’

There isn’t any other way of putting it.

The breadth of Japanese expression is not that wide.

Even searching for a needle dropped in a desert might be easier—at least in that case you would know that somewhere in the desert would be the needle you were looking for.

...Though, it’s not easy to grasp what urgency there would be in circumstances which necessitated searching for a needle in a desert...

‘It’s impossible... Even taking a lifetime, it can’t be done. Even after being reborn as a princess, it’d still be impossible.’

‘Where did the assumption that ya’d get reborn as a princess come from? Nah, nah, don’t worry.

This is why I'm merged with ya—'cause if we're talking about "channels", then my corpse—my relic, ought to have the strongest bond to me of all. So Nadeko-chan, what with being merged with me, will soon be able to find it.'

'Soon...?'

'Soon, if ya make an effort.'

'Nadeko doesn't want to make an effort...'

'Nah, that were where ya say yer gonna do yer best...'

'.....'

So maybe that means that this scrunchie bound around her wrist, would perform dowsing—certainly if that's so, then it could be easier than finding a needle in the desert.

But even then.

'...Is there any chance that the relic has been destroyed or burned or something, and no longer exists?'

'There is... Well, if that's the case, then I'd have to just give up.'

A remark displaying something like good grace from Serpent-san.

Though if he really did have good grace, he would not be demanding help from Nadeko in the first place...

In his position, Nadeko would have given up at the point of having only Nadeko to rely on.

'...About how long is the time limit? When... should Nadeko find Serpent-san's relic by?'

'No idea—being a candle in the wind, it ain't gonna be a surprise if I disappear any time. Now, by using Nadeko-chan's energy I'm still existing—but that ain't no more than an emergency battery. Unfortunately ya ain't compatible.'

'Compatible?'

'It's like forcefully using a foreign electrically supply—rest easy, I ain't planning on taking over Nadeko-chan's body, and it ain't like I'm gonna be merged like this with Nadeko-chan until ya die. If Nadeko-chan doesn't want to help me, if ya can put up with waiting it out long enough, eventually I'll just disappear.'

'.....'

'Make an effort, or wait it out—choose one of the two.'

'.....'

It seems that, to the last, Serpent-san will present Nadeko with options—only, from Nadeko's position, there is no scope for choice.

At least, that's how she thought of it.

She doesn't want to carry on having this distasteful scrunchie around her wrist, and besides, to Nadeko, putting up with something and making an effort were the same thing.

'Nadeko will help, with searching... But, Serpent-san...'

Said Nadeko.

‘Going to school is fine, isn’t it?’

‘Aaan?’

‘Meaning... it’s fine to carry on with normal life...? ...N-Nadeko... doesn’t want to raise suspicions.’

‘Raise suspicions? From who?’

‘...Koyomi Onii-chan.’

Nadeko answered Serpent-san’s question candidly.

‘Nadeko told him it had been nothing... That Nadeko had “imagined it.”’

‘...? Then, Nadeko-chan, rather than not wanting to “raise suspicions”, don’t ya mean ya don’t want to “cause concern”? Ain’t that why ya lied to Koyomi Onii-chan?’

‘Th-That’s...’

She made a mistake. She misspoke.

‘When ya told him those lies, despite what ya said about wanting to be saved by him, I thought that were ’cause ya didn’t want to worry him—were I wrong?’

‘You’re not wrong... Yep, that’s right. It was to not worry him. Worry him...’

Serpent-san reacted to Nadeko trying to gloss over what she had said, as though unconvinced, but having seemingly decided “it doesn’t really matter,” said: ‘Ahh, forget it.’

‘Well, let’s leave it at that—sure, I ain’t gonna say ya have to use all yer time, day and night, for my sake. That’d be overstepping things. And to be fair, for finding my corpse—relic, night’s better suited anyway.’

‘.....’

‘Right, then that’s settled. Daytime’s Nadeko-chan’s time, night’s my time. To show my appreciation for Nadeko-chan’s dedication, I swear I ain’t gonna intrude on yer private time—’

.....

That was what had taken place last night.

That may have gotten confusingly long, but until now, that had been a flashback scene. Now Nadeko is on the landing of the stairs, outside the locked door to the school roof, arguing with Serpent-san. Ah, no—currently.

Currently, she was in a fight to the death with Koyomi Onii-chan.

This narration is a “revolving lantern”—her past flashing before her eyes.

Her regrets rushing by.

Sengoku Nadeko is in the midst of reflecting on where she could have escaped from the course of her fate—very well then.

Let’s return to the revolving lantern.

Round and round and round and round.

‘—Liar. Some god, you are.’

‘Nah, nah... Sure, it were a lie to say I’m quiet, and yeah, I swore I weren’t gonna intrude on ye private life, but I didn’t go as far as to say I weren’t gonna talk. For a god, the lower realm’s all novel—nah, I suppose it ain’t that novel. It don’t get any the better for change.’

‘.....’

‘It’s said that the voice of the people is the voice of God—but I’m a god who likes to talk for himself. But, well, I ain’t out to be a nuisance for Nadeko-chan. I ain’t out to make Nadeko-chan a “pitiable kid”... There ain’t no need and ain’t no point. I get it, I get it. I just have to be quiet.’

‘.....’

‘All right, I get it. I won’t just be quiet, I’ll go to sleep. Ain’t no problem then, right?’

Ain’t like I talk in my sleep, Serpent-san said.

‘—Now’s the season for winter sleep anyway.’

‘... Yep. But you mustn’t really hibernate. If you don’t wake up at night, Nadeko alone won’t be able to do anything.’

Just as Nadeko was giving Serpent-san that reminder.

‘Oi, Sengoku. What are you doing there?’

A voice came from behind her.

More accurately, from down the stairs—calling to Nadeko while looking up at her from below, was her homeroom teacher, Sasayabu-sensei.

Sasayabu-sensei’s nickname is Panda-sensei. Not because he particularly resembles a panda (if anything he’s thin), but purely from his name meaning bamboo grove—but the atmosphere in Class 2-2 is not the right sort for calling the teacher by nickname.

‘A-A-!’

Nadeko turns around to respond to Sasayabu-sensei.

Taking some care of her skirt length, since the height difference on the stairs created a low angle.

‘Anything at all, sir!’

She stumbled on her words.

Mixing “Anything wrong, sir?” with “Nothing at all, sir”, she had managed to become a rather oper girl.

‘?’

Sasayabu-sensei tilts his head.

Well, he would.

‘...Nothing at all, sir.’

She corrected herself.

Nadeko was not quick-witted enough to brazen through such a mistake by getting a laugh out of it... For her it was just embarrassing.

It could take about three days to get over something like that.

‘It was just with the thought of getting some fresh air on the roof... but the door was locked... So then...’

She thought of saying she had been “brought to a standstill”, but the insincerity of those stiff words made her hold them back.

‘.....’

And with that, Nadeko falls silent.

She doesn’t like telling lies.

No, rather than disliking lying, she’s just bad at it...

Right now, she had tried to lie reflexively, but unable to stick to it, she casts her eyes downward.

‘...Oi, oi, Sengoku, you ought to know you’re not allowed on the roof. Sensei is always making that clear.’

‘.....’

Nadeko couldn’t respond to Sasayabu-sensei’s incontrovertible words.

When faced with trouble, she falls silent.

That’s Nadeko. Pleased to meet you.

Certainly Nadeko knew that the roof was off-limits, which was precisely why she had chosen this place to have a “quiet word” with Serpent-san...

That Sasayabu-sensei had passed by here, was probably because he was on his way back from supervising club “morning practice”—Sasayabu-sensei is advisor to the wind instrument club, who use the music room.

‘...Sorry, sir.’

But there would be trouble if she simply gave her homeroom teacher the silent treatment, so she speaks an apology.

Between the Silence and Apology commands, she selected Apology.

No need to bow her head.

She was already looking downward, so posture-wise she had already lowered her head—though, as already mentioned, Nadeko was positioned in a place above Sasayabu-sensei, so it may not in fact be seen in that manner.

‘...The bell’s going to ring soon.’

Said Sasayabu-sensei.

He seems to have shelved the matter of Nadeko’s questionable behavior—the look he gives Nadeko is the look she often gets from adults, meaning not so far as of dealing with a “pitiable kid”, but that given to a “troublesome kid”.

To put it into words, that look would be: “There’s likely to be some kind of problem, but it’d be tiresome to bother going into it.”

She would like them to understand how much a child can be hurt by being looked at like that... But she doesn’t have the courage to say that out loud.

And the tiresomeness is mutual.

Nadeko merely said: 'Understood, sir.'

'Won't be long. There's a short test, isn't there, sir?'

'Yes... Help me pass out the... Hm?'

Just as he was starting to say something, Sasayabu-sensei's words stopped. Nadeko, thinking this strange, read his expression—"What's that?" it seemed to be saying.

Ah, she thought—when she had apologized, both her hands had gone to the sides of her legs. Meaning, her wrist had been exposed to Sasayabu-sensei.

Meaning, Serpent-san on her right wrist.

Gulp, Nadeko swallowed.

Serpent-san stayed quiet—he said nothing and, remaining bound around Nadeko's wrist, he did not stir.

Like this, he really did seem to be no more than a distasteful scrunchie—it was only the lack of taste that could not, through any struggle, be denied.

Anyway, Serpent-san was remaining silent.

He seemed to be pretending to be an accessory just as promised.

She was happy about that, only, in this instance pretending to be an accessory would mean...

'...Well, fine. If it's only that.'

She heard Sasayabu-sensei say in a low voice.

He seemed to be saying it to himself, rather than to be heard.

Apparently, rather than thinking Serpent-san suspicious, he had found fault with Nadeko's simple breach of the school rules.

The regulation that immoderate accessories were to be confiscated...

But it appears Sasayabu-sensei has let it slide.

It's not cause for gratitude.

As this too amounts to no more than an expression of the feeling that "dealing with this kid is tiresome."

It's only what Nadeko has come to expect.

...But it's also a fact that Nadeko herself regards that kind of treatment as being a "breeze" anyway... Having her homeroom teacher not bother to go into her affairs made student life much easier.

Just as Nadeko was breathing a sigh of relief and reflecting on how it might be best to wear a blouse with slightly longer sleeves from tomorrow, however:

'By the way, Sengoku, about that thing Sensei has asked you to get done—how's it coming along?'

Came Sasayabu-sensei's words, causing Nadeko, with a start, to feel like gulping back the sigh she had just breathed.

Not that there's any such figure of speech.

'H-How...?'

'Are you any closer to having it resolved?'

'.....Um.'

At Sasayabu-sensei's words, Nadeko went into a slight—no—large panic, feeling the tips of her own fingers trembling.

Not that she's done a hard sprint, but she's gone weak at the knees.

It was not that she was panicking because she didn't understand what Sasayabu-sensei was talking about—if anything, it was knowing and wanting to avoid that subject, that put her in this severe state.

In the face of Nadeko's reaction, which was hardly worthy of being called a reaction, Sasayabu-sensei said: 'Oi, oi, come on,' as if, how to put it, manifestly disappointed.

'Even you must know that the problem needs to be resolved quickly.'

'.....'

'It all depends on you—Class Rep Sengoku.'

With that said, Sasayabu-sensei raised a hand and left.

Well, well. See, just like always.

While Nadeko's tongue-tied, the other person goes away.

Even her homeroom teacher.

Call it her anti-personnel special move, perhaps.

If there had been anyone who had not been seen off that way, in the entirety of Nadeko's life so far, that, yes, would just be the one—

'Nadeko-chan were the class rep?'

Said Serpent-san, shortly after Sasayabu-sensei had gone.

It was not with a cynical edge, but a tone of plain surprise—Nadeko found some pride in having surprised an oddity who made a business of surprising people.

That's a lie. She found no such thing.

Merely "that's given it away," was how she felt.

Fearing being made fun of, she had wanted to keep it from him...

'Yep. The class rep. That's Nadeko.'

'Like hell. Class rep's that thing, right? The class representative, right? Meaning, the student who takes care of class business, the most looked up to in the class, right? And yer saying that's Nadeko-chan? Aaan?'

Serpent-san came across as extremely unconvinced—from an outside perspective, it may have sounded extraordinarily rude, but, well, it wasn't as though Nadeko couldn't understand his feelings.

'Not really... A class rep's not especially looked up to...'

Serpent-san's knowledge was drawn from Nadeko's knowledge in the first place, so the back and

forth of Serpent-san putting questions to Nadeko, and Nadeko making denials, could be said to be “pointless”... But knowledge and perception, and the affirmation or negation of that knowledge were different matters.

And given that he had not known about it until now, apparently the fact that Nadeko was the class rep fell in the category of memory, rather than knowledge.

‘If it’d been a choice like Hanekawa-san, a class rep among class reps, being chosen, that’d be one thing... but it was different with Nadeko.’

‘Different? Different how?’

‘It was drawing the short straw.’

Said Nadeko. She’s aware it’s a bit of a “self-shaming” expression, but in this case, there isn’t any getting round that.

‘Serpent-san noticed the weird atmosphere in the class, didn’t you? It became that way after the 1st term, in the summer vacation... So at the start of the 2nd term, when the class representative was decided, there weren’t any volunteers or people put forward... So at the end of a dispute—’

No.

To be accurate, there had never been any dispute.

All there had been was an oppressive mood.

‘—Nadeko was chosen.’

‘Through what kind of twists and turns, do things come out like that?’

It seemed unlikely Serpent-san would be convinced even if it were explained to him—well, that’s probably no surprise.

It would be rather hard to explain that heavy mood the class was under. “Mood”—in a novel it’s between the lines, so she wasn’t going to be able to describe it.

She isn’t very good at Japanese as a subject.

She’s even worse at explaining.

‘But... Um, if it had to be put into words... There wasn’t any girl in the class who hadn’t used a “charm”, except Nadeko, that’s why... Probably.’

‘Ahh. So, process of elimination, huh.’

That’d be about the size of it, said Serpent-san.

Serpent-san appeared quite satisfied with putting it down to a process of elimination—that he would be convinced by this was somehow a touch painful for Nadeko.

However, that Nadeko was hardly class rep material, was understood by none better than Nadeko herself, and she had felt this all too keenly for these two months, so she was not about to argue there.

If anything, it was a meeting of minds.

If they had glasses, she would have raised a toast to it.

‘So essentially, weren’t no one wanted to do it and weren’t no one they wanted to let do it, so the work got pushed onto Nadeko-chan—they’re a right bunch of no-goods, aaan?’

‘Not really... It wasn’t exactly pushed...’

It was not exactly that she had had it pushed onto her, however it was true that she hadn’t been able to refuse it.

Like she had been broken down.

‘Well then, so at least they ain’t quite so bad as to abuse a timid girl by forcing her into some awful duty. Sha! Sha! Sha!’

‘...Anyway, if you’re talking about people pushing work onto Nadeko, Serpent-san’s doing just that.’

‘Oh? Ah, well, yeah, that’s right—so I’m a no-good and all.’

Unabashedly, he howls with laughter.

As if to say: “Ya got me there.”

The incorrigible cheek.

‘I reckon it’s just how the world works—that unassertive kids like Nadeko-chan will draw the short straw. Were always the way.’

‘.....’

‘But, with that being that—what were that teacher on about? The thing he asked ya to do—what were that?’

‘...Th-’

Having expected this to come at some point, Nadeko had a line prepared for Serpent-san’s natural question, and delivers it as scripted.

‘That’s none of your business... Serpent-san.’

‘None of my business, huh? I thought me and Nadeko-chan were partners, one in body and soul.’

‘D... Don’t think that...’

Her tone becomes frail.

It’s hard to give a “firm rejection”.

And Serpent-san presses on against Nadeko.

‘Ain’t certain it ain’t my business either—right now, I’ve got something I need Nadeko-chan to do for me. I ain’t gonna stand for someone cutting in.’

‘...If it’s about who was first, it was the teacher...’

Nadeko reluctantly says.

If possible, she would have liked to have kept him in the dark, but talking vaguely and then having to fend off questions after that, would be hard for someone like Nadeko—so she was left with having to go ahead and lay it all out clearly.

“Do something about the atmosphere in the class,” was what he asked to have done. Quite a while back.’

‘...Harr?’

Incredulous, Serpent-san opened his mouth.

She half expected to hear his gaping jaw clang.

‘Oi, oi, what’s with that? That ain’t a job for the class representative—it’s one for the teacher, ain’t it?’

‘...Yep. Well, that’s true enough.’

Having sense pointed out by an oddity makes her wince.

Well, to be fair, while he may be an oddity, Serpent-san is a god, so he probably would speak some truths.

‘What’s called... passing the buck.’

‘Sha! Sha!—Worse than me, ain’t he? Don’t take more than a glance to know that ain’t an atmosphere that a single child on the inside can solve, aaan?’

‘...It doesn’t especially matter.’

Said Nadeko.

Quite whether Serpent-san, hearing of this matter, is sympathizing with Nadeko or whether he is simply amusing himself at her expense, is not something Nadeko could tell (since she couldn’t read his expression), but either way, she doesn’t want to keep talking about it.

After all, this matter.

In Nadeko’s mind—is already *finished*.

It’s over and done with.

It’s like arguing this and that over the contents of a manga past its last chapter.

It’s barren.

‘What? Don’t matter? ’Course it matters.’

‘What Sasayabu-sensei wants done isn’t going to “hinder” what Serpent-san wants done... So i doesn’t matter.’

‘Oi, oi, it ain’t like I think so long as I get what I want granted, that I ain’t bothered about wha happens with Nadeko-chan’s life. Hey, if Nadeko-chan wants, I ain’t gonna mind if ya feel like talking things over with me.’

‘Talk things over...?’

Counsel with god. Somehow it has strange ring to it.

Perhaps it would be something like confessional... No, it’s not even as though Nadeko actually wants comforting, so Serpent-san’s concern is misdirected.

‘It’s not like that... There’s nothing especially wrong, so Nadeko’s fine...’

‘There’s nothing wrong? With having work pushed onto ya? From both yer classmates and yer homeroom teacher?’

‘Nothing’s wrong. After all...’

Said Nadeko.

‘Nadeko’s just not really doing anything.’

‘...Not anything?’

‘For the class rep work and the work from the teacher.’

Nadeko’s doing nothing, she said.

And with that, Nadeko began going down the stairs.

Just as Sasayabu-sensei had said, it’s soon time for the bell—Sasayabu-sensei says all sorts of wrong things, but he’s right about the time.

So she headed for the classroom.

Serpent-san, with a ‘.....’ became quiet.

Presumably he had read the mood.

After that, until school ended, Serpent-san spoke not one word.

## 011

That night.

Nadeko, as per her promise to Serpent-san, goes out in search of Serpent-san’s corpse—she slips quietly out from her home.

That her heart raced at feeling like a bit of a rebellious girl, she would rather keep secret.

‘Sha! Sha!—This puts my mind to rest.’

As soon as she had gone outside, Serpent-san opens his mouth for the first time in a while. Perhaps he had, as he had said, been sleeping—maybe to economize on energy, or something.

‘It’s ’cause of the way ya were talking this morning... I were worried that with what I had asked ya to do too, maybe Nadeko-chan had just been saying ya had accepted to do it, when really ya were gonna do nothing.’

‘...Nadeko won’t do that.’

Anyway don’t talk yet, Nadeko says.

She wanted him to stay quiet until they were a little further from her house.

She would risk becoming a “pitiable kid”.

For once Serpent-san obediently did as Nadeko had asked—and then, after a while, once more he said: ‘I were worried.’

From the fact that he had repeated it, presumably he wasn’t saying it for effect, but had really been anxious.

And presumably he had really had his mind put at ease.

‘After all, it ain’t like I got to pick Nadeko-chan as my partner as the result of an interview, taking

yer character into consideration—if Nadeko-chan were lazy and a casual liar, I'd be left with nothing I could do but burying my face in my hands. Well, I ain't got hands to bury my face in though...’

A not too funny snake joke.

Nadeko is told she's a “gigglebox”, but she won't laugh at jokes that aren't funny.

‘What Nadeko can't do, Nadeko won't do... What won't be done, can't be done, and what can't be done, won't be done—that's all there is to it.’

Says Nadeko. While walking.

‘Lazy... and a casual liar... could be what Nadeko is. Yes... At the very least, Nadeko can't say that that isn't the case. It might be. But... looking for Serpent-san's relic... well, that seems doable...’

‘Does it now? Is it something that can be found with such zeal, I wonder.’

‘.....’

She was a touch fed up with Serpent-san talking, even now, as though to make an “issue” of things, rather dulling what enthusiasm she had, but certainly, looking at Nadeko as a class rep or how Nadeko was toward her homeroom teacher, no one could be blamed for thinking her an untrustworthy girl.

In fact, it's not as though Nadeko is a trustworthy girl... Of course, she would hate to be called untrustworthy though...

‘Serpent-san, will you listen?’

‘Hmm? To what?’

‘How to put it... It's a “gripe”, but will you listen to it?’

‘.....? Yeah, sure, I'll listen to ya. Shoot.’

‘Kids who don't make a fuss, are shy, not good at talking... and are quiet, like Nadeko... weak kids who aren't good at making friends and cry easily... for some reason people think they're “an-in-peach-able”.’

““An-in-peach-able”?”

Unimpeachable, huh, says Serpent-san.

Nadeko nods.

‘Actually, that's probably why everyone made Nadeko be the class rep, and why Sasayabu-sensei made that ridiculous request too... But they're wrong... Nadeko's not “unimpeachable”, and not “spotless”... and not a “good kid” either... Having people form their own expectations and then be disappointed with you is, to be honest, kind of hard.’

She said that, while recalling Sasayabu-sensei's disappointed expression.

It's a “gripe”, plain and simple.

She ought not to be saying things like this.

But just as having your expectations betrayed is painful, it is also painful to betray expectations. Even if you never asked for anything to be expected of you.

‘So having said all that, Nadeko will say this for you upfront, Serpent-san... As atonement for having killed your “kin” and chopped them up into pieces, Nadeko’s going to do as much as is possible for you. But that said, it’s not like there can be any guarantee that Serpent-san’s relic will be found... So, if things don’t work out, then please:’

Don’t be disappointed.

Said Nadeko, and carried on walking.

She doesn’t look at Serpent-san on her right wrist.

It had taken a lot of courage to say this much. The cost effectiveness of courage is surprisingly poor. When she considers the labors ahead of her, she suspects she may have got her pacing rather wrong, but—

‘...Sha! Sha! I ain’t out to squeeze a cast-iron guarantee from Nadeko-chan. It’s just it ain’t no good to me if yer searching half-arsed, is all—at any rate, I ain’t got no one but Nadeko-chan to cling on, ya see.’

‘Cloning?’

‘Cling on.’

‘Cling on..... Erm.’

Well then, says Nadeko to start afresh.

Not starting over with an “anyway” or an “enough about that” because she doesn’t like the way the conversation’s going, but rather, in this case, it was with a sense of getting round to dealing with the real business.

‘Nadeko also needs to sleep, so it’s not like the search can go on all night... So, Serpent-san, just how should Nadeko go about searching for your relic?’

That it would be by dowsing had just been Nadeko’s guess and wasn’t solid.

Not knowing where it is or what it looks like, if she doesn’t get Serpent-san to tell her how to look for his relic, there would be no deciding a plan for what to do next...

‘Sha! Sha! For the time being, just wander around hereabouts—notwithstanding what I said before well, basically, I don’t reckon it can be anywhere too far from the shrine.’

‘...Why?’

‘Why’s a bit of a tricky question to answer, but searching around where the thing used to be, is a decent way to go about it, ain’t it?—It ain’t like it were stolen or anything, ya see.’

‘.....’

So, it is not that it has been stolen?

But even if it hasn’t been stolen—Nadeko had been assuming that it had been “taken away by someone”.

After all, given the relic itself wouldn’t be moving of its own accord, unless someone had carried it off, then it shouldn’t disappear. Presumably it wouldn’t walk off on its own.

...But then again, it is an oddity.

What's more, it is a "corpse" that was worthy of being worshiped as a god, so perhaps, contrary to expectations, it just might walk on its own. That corpses don't move, is only matter of what is ordinarily so. Vampires are also, you could say, a sort of undead corpse, so perhaps "walking the night" is a possibility.

'When you come down to it, what the relic is, is my body, so being my body, it's my real form, so if ya pass near it, there'll be a response—I'll vibrate like a mobile phone. Then I'd want Nadeko-chan to narrow the location down by searching around that vicinity.'

'...Meaning, Nadeko should just keep on walking like this without stopping?'

If that's so, she feels a wee sense of an anticlimax.

The hat she was wearing today was a peaked baseball cap, not a knit hat, but, in a vaguely deflated mood, Nadeko tugged its peak down.

Not for any real reason, though. It's just a habit.

'To begin with, yeah.'

Said Serpent-san, in a manner of speaking that somehow didn't bode too well for the future, but Nadeko pretended not to notice this.

It seemed unlikely that inquiring would produce an answer she would like too well.

What she doesn't want to know, she pretends not to know.

What she doesn't want to understand, she pretends not to understand.

'...Would the relic maybe have gotten buried in the ground or embedded in a wall? Meaning, might it be hidden somewhere?'

'Maybe—I dunno. Nor what sort of state it might be in. Nadeko-chan brought this up just earlier, bu maybe it'll even turn out that it were chopped up into pieces and scattered about separately. Ya know, instead of being hidden, maybe it's been impaled up on trees here and there. Sha! Sha!'

'.....'

She's been given a taste of his sarcasm.

It's an unpleasant feeling, but that's to be expected with sarcasm.

She doesn't suppose there's any sarcasm in the world that's nice.

'So, Serpent-san... just to get this straight, from now, every night... until Serpent-san's relic is found, Nadeko should go about the town... having a nocturnal stroll?'

'Yeah, that's about the size of it. If ya sum it up. I'd rather ya didn't make it sound quite so picturesque though, if ya can.'

'So there won't be any fighting with weird enemies or having to compete with rivals over the item?'

'Right... Wait, what's that about? Nadeko-chan weren't hoping for that sort of adventure, were ya?'

'It wasn't like it was a hope...'

But that was certainly how she had imagined it would be—not in hope, but in fear though.

So.

An anticlimax—is what it feels like. Just what could this sense of unfulfillment be...?

‘By the way, what happens when the relic is found?’

‘I suppose what’ll happen is, it’ll be like *I re-transfer over* from Nadeko-chan to it... Well, it’s originally my own body, ain’t it, so rather than transferring, more a matter of “returning”.’

‘...So, then that’d be goodbye to Serpent-san.’

‘That’s right, yeah. Hm? Ya seem like ya ain’t all that glad about that, Nadeko-chan. Surely ya ain’t gone and grown fond of me, have ya?’

‘It’s not that...’

A single day since they met, it wasn’t like they had spent enough time together yet for her to have grown an attachment, and to put it bluntly, she isn’t good with rough sorts like Serpent-san.

Not because he’s a snake, or because he’s an oddity, but as a matter of his personality.

‘...It’s just, Nadeko’s bad at goodbyes.’

‘Hmm?’

‘If someone... it doesn’t matter who... goes away... it’s tiresome, isn’t it?’

‘Tiresome? Ya got a weird way of putting it—why, it’s almost as though Nadeko-chan—’

Sounding dubious, Serpent-san had just begun to say something—indeed “doubtful” and “suspicious” was his manner—however, for Nadeko perhaps luckily, those words were to be left uncompleted.

For at that very moment:

“Brrrrrrrr♪”

Serpent-san’s white body, tied around Nadeko’s right wrist, vibrated—Serpent-san had earlier likened it to a mobile phone’s vibration function, but since Nadeko doesn’t have a mobile, she can’t be certain about whether that analogy is correct.

For an approximate example, she had taken it to mean something like the way the handheld massage device that her father used shook—but frankly the vibration was rather stronger than she had imagined.

Enough to hurt. No picturesque analogy this, but she had feared for her hand being torn off.

‘Wh... what?’

‘Sha! Sha!—Oi, oi, nice and quick, we’ve got a response. Nadeko-chan, head in the direction of 5 o’clock!’

‘The direction of 5 o’clock?’

Which way would that be?

If she’s suddenly having things described to her like she were in a movie, she’s not going to understand.

‘Picture a clock in yer head. The direction Nadeko-chan is facing now is noon, so 5 o’clock—look, it means just to the right of behind ya!’

‘J-Just to the right of behind...’

Even having it spelled out now, it doesn't really come to her, but for the time being she does as she's told and heads over in that direction.

Nadeko the Lackey, she might be.

Of course, since she isn't walking through a desert or a jungle, but through a town with streets, she can't proceed directly just to the right of behind.

After going around houses and while getting course correction updates from Serpent-san (being a bit annoying with his this o'clocks and that o'clocks. She would like him to accept that describing diagonals was pointless), where Nadeko ultimately arrived at was a park.

Nadeko is widely acknowledged to be an indoors person and so from childhood had not done much playing in parks, but this small park was one that she had known of, even so.

She could see playground equipment, such as a jungle gym, a see-saw and chin-up bars—these days, there is apparently a trend toward successively removing playground equipment, but this town's "local authority" didn't seem to be getting around to dealing with that.

For better or for worse.

'Right. It'll be around here.'

'Around here...? It's a sandpit.'

Where Serpent-san's dowsing, or navigation, had at last come to a stop, was, yes, none other than one of the park's scant safe spots: the sandpit—no, perhaps even such a sandpit could be subject to "deadly hazards" such as "risk of buried glass", "sanitation" or "harmful if swallowed".

.....

Maybe not "harmful if swallowed"?

Just about the only thing that's safe if swallowed is food.

'Wh... what? Meaning, this sandpit is where Serpent-san's corpse is buried?'

She's gone and called it a corpse. Whoops.

Care is needed in how it's referred to—but she's also a bit averse to describing a thing buried in a sandpit like this, as a relic.

'Right, ain't no mistake—Sha! Sha! Or what, Nadeko-chan? Ya got yer doubts about the accuracy of my dowsing, have ya? Aaan?'

'Not so much doubts...'

Yes.

Well, she supposes she did have her doubts, but she wasn't about to offer them up for a debate.

But being buried in a sandpit—that's like something a child would do... Or no, she thinks, it's on the level of how a dog or cat might hide something.

'...But, well, if Serpent-san says so... Might as well give it a search.'

'What's with that? Like ya ain't got no get-up-and-go.'

'Nadeko's bursting with get-up-and-go.'

Saying that, Nadeko got out the gardening trowel she had brought with her in a knapsack.

On the basis that she was supposedly conducting a search, she had brought it as an item that might come in handy (she had various other things too. Rope and carving chisels, for example)... But she never expected to be using it so soon.

‘Go on, hurry up and dig. Ain’t no mistake about it—my relic is buried down there.’

‘.....’

‘Sha! Sha!—I feel like we’ve drawn a winning ticket on the first go. Aaan? Ain’t that lucky, Nadeko-chan? ’Cause with just a half hour stroll, yer already gonna be rid of me, ain’t ya?’

He is being rather animated, seemingly having quite forgotten what Nadeko had just earlier been talking about. Since her impression of Serpent-san until now had been basically that of a guarded cynic, this excited state is something of a surprise.

Well—it’s his own body that’s been found, so it’s probably only natural that he would be excited. And found so quickly, at that.

Whether the comparison to drawing a winning lottery ticket was apt, exaggerated or perhaps even insufficient, she couldn’t tell... But that the odds had been very much against it was certain.

Something to be glad about then.

‘.....’

With a scrunch, she shoved her trowel into the sandpit.

At any rate, it seems that with this, she would, so soon already, be bidding farewell to Serpent-san—when she thinks of that, the “tiresome” feeling comes over Nadeko, just as she expected.

But Nadeko’s feelings were entirely irrelevant—when it comes to just digging in sand, motivation is not needed, and besides, all it amounts to is only a matter of whether it is sooner or latter—no—a matter of whether it is sooner or later, as at some point goodbye would come.

It just happens to be now, is all.

It was a short time together, but it was not as though she had wanted it to be long—no snake jokes, please.

Goodbye, to Serpent-san.

Once she finds the relic here.

## 012

She didn’t find it.

She dug and dug through nothing but sand, and in the course of digging, arrived at the bottom.

This was the first she knew of there being a bottom to sandpits.

Though it’s obvious.

But from her experience in childhood, her mental image of a sandpit was of sand going on forever—like a bottomless pit. Or it had been.

Only, well, here's the bottom. It was concrete.

Apparently, concrete shaped like a swimming pool had simply been buried into the ground... How prosaic. She could have done without knowing.

The depth, she guessed to be about 50 cm.

So to a young child, a depth of 50 cm is enough to be infinite.

‘...Serpent-san.’

‘.....’

‘Hey, Serpent-san.’

‘.....’

It is Serpent-san's turn to be speechless.

As though they've undergone a role change, nay, reversal.

‘Hey.’

Hey. Hey. Hey.

Nadeko badgered him.

Well, given that he's bound to her wrist, responding to his silence by getting fed up and leaving is not going to work.

She knew she risked irritating him, and her mood was such that she would like to have left if she could have... But then again, she was also so tired that she didn't want to move.

‘It's not here. The relic.’

‘.....’

‘It's not here...’

She repeated her assertion, and at that, with an ‘Ah-hah,’ Serpent-san at last reacted.

He is undaunted. Defiant even.

‘Seems it were a false reading.’

‘A f-false reading...?’

How is he able to say such a thing undaunted... After he had been saying all that about there being no mistake?

And after making another person's wrist shake so fiercely, practically like a typhoon—that was a false reading?

‘Very interesting, very interesting. The things ya learn, right, Nadeko-chan?’

‘If... if it was a false reading then... s-say that it's a false reading sooner... You must have known at an earlier stage, didn't you...?’

It's rare that Nadeko would complain like this, but it's only natural that she should want to.

The sandpit, dug up not just in one spot, but all over the place, was looking, well, ready for a game

of human whack-a-mole.

And now she had the job of making it flat by filling those holes to look forward to.

A fruitless and futile exercise.

‘What? Ya can just leave it like that, can’t ya? Aaan?’

‘It can’t be left like this... That would be “anti-social”. What if a child was hurt by falling in a hole?’

‘Yer worrying too much...’

Perhaps, but she ought to do what she can to put it back to something close to how it had been.

That being so, it looks like tonight’s search shall have to proceed no further. It is a funny way of putting it, even if she says so herself, but the first day has been spent playing in a sandpit.

How childish.

‘So there can be false readings...’

‘Well, these things happen. Even gods ain’t all powerful.’

‘Isn’t it because they’re all powerful that they’re called gods? Omnipotent, omniscient god is what people say, isn’t it?’

‘Omnipotent and all powerful ain’t the same thing, ya know—check a dictionary for details.’

‘Hmm... Nadeko’s not got a dictionary. So, this shy-of-all-powerful dowsing—is it going to repeat its false reading? If that’s the case, with the wild-goose chases and wasted effort, it’s going to be pretty tough, both on time and strength...’

‘Naah, I got what the problem is already figured out. This ain’t gonna happen again.’

He seems very confident.

Which is not grounds to trust him.

“Talk is cheap,” as they say—and the one who would bear the cost of that cheap talk in wasted effort would be Nadeko, so really, she can’t be having with this.

To top it off, thanks to Serpent-san being bound on the wrist of her right hand, the strain from using her trowel with that hand is increased, so, while it might not be “tendinitis”, she’s probably going to have muscle ache tomorrow.

‘So why did it give a false reading, anyway? Is it like Doraemon’s “Missing Person Stick” having a success rate of 70%?’

‘Nah—it ain’t that.’

Due to their limited sharing of knowledge, her obscure reference was understood without comment, leaving her feeling a touch of dissatisfaction, but regardless, Serpent-san had rejected Nadeko’s supposition.

‘It’s that my spiritual energy is scattered—basically.’

‘Scattered?’

‘Or I ought to say it’s *being scattered*.’

His energy is being scattered—erm.

That sounds like something she thinks she has heard before—so, when and where did she hear it?

The drifting.

“Bad things” had—something or other.

Because of that, she was sure, Koyomi Onii-chan had—

‘—So does that mean, rather than dowsing, it should be pictured more like metal detecting? And so it’s like, if there were a layer of ground with a lot of iron in it, it would be hard to find a buried land mine...?’

‘Ain’t that nice of ya—talking about my body like it were a land mine, Nadeko-chan—aaan?’

She seemed to have raised his hackles (scales?), but as he said nothing further, it sounded as though her understanding of it was not entirely off the mark.

Nadeko sighed.

If her understanding is right, then just how much waste and futile failure would Nadeko have to dig up, she wondered—and if time ran out while she was doing that...

If time ran out... Well, in that event, it wouldn’t be Nadeko’s problem, but Serpent-san’s though...

However, the same as Nadeko hated making an effort, she also hated wasted effort.

Well, it doesn’t matter what she says.

The work of specifying the location, through dowsing, could only be entrusted to Serpent-san—leaving Nadeko to be, as it were, a human spade, so her problem or not, she could do nothing other than trust and obey him.

Trust and obey. Just like being in service to a god.

‘So... by any means, that’s it until tomorrow.’

‘Oi, oi, Nadeko-chan. Yer awful quick to throw yer hand in—some such genius gambler, are ya? Let’s not give up yet and at least try one more place, right?’

‘No. Nadeko’s tired.’

She’s done for the day. Nadeko-san is clocking off.

After that, ignoring Serpent-san’s objection, Nadeko began the work of leveling the sandpit—no, since thinking of it as work would make it tiresome, she pictures it instead as making play out of plowing the sandpit.

That may have been a mistake.

Since she was doing it thinking of it as a game, the efficiency with which she conducted the operation dropped slightly and it took even longer than it would have if she had just done it normally—if she confesses in detail, what with being in a sandpit, since she was there, she may have got carried away with not just filling the holes, but playing for real at building small mounds, castles and such.

Bad luck, you might call it.

If she had only known, then it would have been better to have heeded Serpent-san’s desire, and

moved to some other place to search for Serpent-san's relic a little longer.

‘Ah. Found you. Sengoku.’

While she was in the middle of building Nagoya Castle (since there may be a copyright issue, perhaps best to call it Nagoya Castle-like), worrying about difficulties with the angle of the shachihoko end tiles, she heard that voice come from above her head.

She raises her face.

Carelessly, she had been lax with how she was wearing her hat.

Their eyes locked.

‘Ko... Koyomi Onii-chan.’

One step outside the sandpit, was Koyomi Onii-chan.

Koyomi Onii-chan.

Real name: Araragi Koyomi.

Wearing a serious face—in the dead of night.

Perhaps he's out for a stroll?

## 013

‘Listen, Sengoku. If someone other than me had found you, they'd have lost their rag with you.’

A change of location, to Koyomi Onii-chan's house.

Koyomi Onii-chan's room.

It's a neat room, suiting Koyomi Onii-chan, which Nadeko had come to visit a number of times since June, but today—on this particular night—she didn't feel her normal excitement.

What there was, was an intense nervousness, similar to what she had felt the first time she had come.

...But unlike that time, she was being made to kneel on the floor, so this could well be said to be worse than then.

It's like the difference between a funfair and a cell.

‘Listen, Sengoku.’

Koyomi Onii-chan repeats.

What he had just said seemed to imply he wasn't angry, but he was clearly fuming.

This might be the first time she's seen the rage version of Koyomi Onii-chan. So Koyomi Onii-chan gets angry like this over this sort of thing?

It's rather splendid.

‘Sneaking out of your home during the night and fooling around... If you do things like that, you'll end up like me, Karen-chan or Tsukihi-chan, you know.’

‘.....’

Ehhh.

Is that really what he ought to be saying?

By the way, why Koyomi Onii-chan is angry with Nadeko, is that he's taking issue with Nadeko's night out—however, while she certainly did take a night out, sneaking outside when her parents weren't looking, and she probably should be scolded for that, the actual content of her night's activities had been making a Nagoya-esque castle, so it doesn't seem to her to warrant being taken back to his room and made to kneel like this.

Only, well, it seems that Koyomi Onii-chan, as someone with two younger sisters of a similar age, couldn't help but treat Nadeko's "misconduct" as a cause for concern...

She has even been made to remove her hat.

Leaving her feeling quite starkers.

'I don't want to go on at you, Sengoku, but nighttime is for sleeping. So long as you're not a vampire.'

‘.....’

She can't tell him that she had been searching for something.

Well, for that matter, Koyomi Onii-chan had also been out on a search—the person who Nadeko's parents, having discovered Nadeko's absence, had tried calling in the hope of information as to her whereabouts, had been Tsukihi-chan, that is, Koyomi Onii-chan's little sister.

Tsukihi-chan is well known even amongst the PTAs, you see.

So, Tsukihi-chan being Tsukihi-chan, presumably reasoning: "It'll be fine, it's just the once," had immediately told the lie that: "She's staying here for the night," however, Koyomi Onii-chan had just happened to be passing by his sisters' room (passing by his sisters' room?).

'You idiot! What if Sengoku gets wiped out!?'

And with that, he had apparently flown out of his house to search the town for Nadeko.

Nadeko hadn't been able to find what she was looking for, but Koyomi Onii-chan, just by intuition, had found her. Even making allowance for his use of a bike, it's an impressive display of dowsing ability—very different from Serpent-san, it might be added.

Serpent-san has been wordless for some time—it appears he is "adhering" to his promise not to speak in front of people—but come to think of it, Serpent-san knows about Koyomi Onii-chan.

That's what he had said. That day in June.

When Nadeko and Koyomi Onii-chan, together with Kanbaru-san, performed the "ritual" at the grounds of the North White Snake Shrine, he had been watching from inside the shrine building—and so now...

Now, "looking" at Koyomi Onii-chan, what must Serpent-san be thinking?

'Is...'

Thinking there might be no end in sight like this, for now Nadeko timidly tries to get a word in.

Making an effort in the hope of diverting the subject.

Though she doesn't want to make an effort.

'Is Tsukihi-chan... up?'

'Hm, Tsukihi-chan? She can be a cold so-and-so, so she's already getting her sleep in the room next door. If you want I'll go wake her?'

Nadeko shakes her head.

She wasn't asking because she actually wanted that... If anything, that sounds perilous.

She's Koyomi Onii-chan's own sister, so perhaps he doesn't quite see it himself, but Tsukihi-chan is basically scary.

A terror.

The name Fire Sisters is not for nothing... She has had some episodes that really were no laughing matter.

She's a good kid though. Nadeko's not just saying that—she really, truly is a good kid.

It's just, her indomitable energy is of a different magnitude to the likes of Nadeko.

Immeasurable, even.

Seriously, a good kid isn't necessarily unimpeachable.

? No need to hold back on her account, Sengoku. With her downturned eyes, it hardly matters whether she's asleep or awake.'

'The shape of her eyes doesn't seem relevant... No, Tsukihi-chan's been troubled enough... Even made to lie.'

Nadeko would need to speak to her soon to get their stories straight on that front, but before that, she will need to thank Tsukihi-chan.

'Fair enough. However, more importantly, Sengoku, you owe your parents an apology. I know I'm always telling you not to make a habit of being so quick to say sorry so often, but on this occasion you've got to apologize properly.'

'...Y-Yep... You're right...'

'Seriously, if I hadn't found you, who knows what might've happened...'

Koyomi Onii-chan gives an exaggerated shrug of his shoulders.

Never mind who knows what... Nadeko doesn't think anything in particular would have happened.

Probably, she would have finished leveling the sandpit, cleaned up her Nagoya-esque castle too, and returned home... Well, her mother and father would have been mad at her, then she would have slept, woken up and gone to school.

Unlike a big city such as Tokyo, this is a nice, safe town.

The things that make the news don't happen here.

It likely comes from dealing with Tsukihi-chan and Karen-chan, but Koyomi Onii-chan's concern over younger girls seems a tad excessive.

It's possibly even fair to say he's overprotective... It's nice that he's kind, but his attitude toward his two sisters may be going too far.

Beyond overprotective, it's on the level of overmeddling.

Quite what he's guarding against is a mystery.

'Seriously, you leave yourselves too vulnerable. You, Tsukihi-chan and Karen-chan... I don't get it—it's like you don't understand you're children.'

'N-Nadeko... knows.'

She can't speak for Tsukihi-chan or Karen-chan—those two have quite a tendency to overreach themselves—but Nadeko thinks of herself as a child.

An ignorant child.

The bottom of the sandpit is about as far as she knows.

'Ah, no, what you actually don't understand, isn't that you're children, but just how indecently children are looked upon by the eyes of the world.'

'.....'

A staggering outlook.

Flabbergasting.

Could it be that what Koyomi Onii-chan is fighting against, is in fact his own self?

But Nadeko thought better of putting that assertion to him.

'Sorry.'

So instead she apologized.

It's a habit. A conditioned reflex, you might even call it—either way, it's a magic incantation for ending discussion.

Saying incantation makes it sound the same as a "charm".

Though it's unclear how effective it is.

'Well, okay, if you know not to do it again... Hm? So, what's up? What was a good kid like you doing walking around, out late at night?'

This again didn't seem the right occasion to be asserting that she was not a good kid, and on that account, it was also a question she would rather not answer honestly.

That answer would be that she had been looking for Serpent-san's relic... But she couldn't of course tell Koyomi Onii-chan that. Otherwise she would have asked for his help from the beginning—she wouldn't have lied on the phone.

From Koyomi Onii-chan.

Events this time—are a secret.

*After all—unlike in June.*

*Nadeko isn't a victim.*

Because she's a victimizer—she killed so many of Serpent-san's fellow snakes.

‘? Sengoku, I don’t suppose...’

Koyomi Onii-chan says, regarding Nadeko’s silence with apparent suspicion.

‘I don’t suppose, that maybe, what you said to me yesterday night on the phone could’ve been a lie, and you’ve gotten caught up in something bad...?’

‘.....’

Nadeko’s lips set sealed in a straight line.

Koyomi Onii-chan’s intuition is not to be underestimated.

Perhaps it’s even a bit too sharp—but this may be the fruits of his many battles against oddities so far.

Though, well, rather than being caught up, this time Nadeko had been bound.

So she thinks, looking at her right wrist.

And: ‘N-No...’ she says.

Well, she can’t claim to have said it with any strength of conviction—to anyone listening it surely could only have sounded like she was buying time with an automatic denial.

‘Oh, okay, so it’s not that. Phew.’

Koyomi Onii-chan said, apparently relieved.

...He appears to have believed her.

Having been the one who told the lie, it’s not exactly Nadeko’s place to say this, but Koyomi Onii-chan is just a bit too much of a nice guy.

Too much of a good kid.

‘I thought for sure it would be that Sengoku was keeping from me that an oddity had verbally manipulated you into doing some task for its own ends, like finding something for it, and so that was why you were digging up that sandpit.’

Bingo.

If there’s one thing he’s missed, it’s the point that Nadeko’s weakness, or rather her guilt, is being taken advantage of—that Nadeko had killed and cut up all those snakes is something Koyomi Onii-chan is aware of, but of course he’s hardly likely to guess that a snake would have turned up to complain about that incident.

He truly does believe, doesn’t he?

In Nadeko, as unimpeachable.

‘No... It’s not that at all. I-It’s just... there’s been quite a bit of trouble with Nadeko’s class... and with being the class rep...’

She tries to think of an excuse to fit, but unable to come up with a total lie, Nadeko tells him something grounded in reality.

Of course, that’s still no different from lying.

‘S-So... feeling weighed on by it... Nadeko wandered out of the house without really meaning to.’

‘Ah, I see. Yeah, that sort of thing can happen.’

Koyomi Onii-chan seemed to accept this.

The idea that some trouble at school would lead to leaving home late at night doesn’t hang together all that coherently, but Koyomi Onii-chan himself has gone through rocky patches with his parents after he became a high school student, making him uncomfortable being at home, so it seems like it was, to him, persuasive enough.

Though that too, may itself be part of what’s behind Koyomi Onii-chan reprimanding Nadeko like this today.

Seeing himself in her, there probably would be things he would want to say.

‘But while I can understand how you’d feel, Sengoku, running away like that won’t solve things.’

‘Running away... won’t solve things...’

‘If that’s what’s up, you could’ve talked to me about it. That trouble in your class... what is it? Nothing to do with Kaiki’s charms, is it?’

‘.....’

That’s some good intuition. Really.

Well, on that front, she had spoken to him a bit about it before—though from Koyomi Onii-chan’s perspective, it’s something that ought to have been already resolved.

No, not just from his perspective, but for anyone—for Nadeko and for everyone in her class, it was resolved once Kaiki Deishuu-san left the town.

That there are some problems that exist from having been resolved—and that there are also things that from having ended, will end anew—that too...

Is something that Koyomi Onii-chan, better than Nadeko, may know only too well.

‘...No.’

She gets out a denial.

Understandably not quite swallowing this denial as it stands, Koyomi Onii-chan wears an unconvinced expression.

And:

‘Sengoku.’

He says.

‘I realize you’re in middle school and you’re bound to have your fill of worries and troubles—but you don’t have to bear them alone, okay? Maybe I’m not quite cut out to offer advice, but still, I can at least lend you an ear.’

‘.....’

He’s telling her this while looking very serious.

When Koyomi Onii-chan gets serious, it’s somehow both reassuring and a bit frightening.

Usually, he’s someone who just jokes around.

‘Listen, Sengoku. The kanji for person [人] is created through mutual support...’

Now he’s started talking like the head of a school.

The sheer “corniness” of it, takes her breath away—she was dangerously close to cracking up.

To think, in this day and age, there’s still someone who would use that line without irony...!

‘...you tell people and: “To think, in this day and age, there’s still someone who would use that line without irony,” is how some will moan about it!’

Koyomi Onii-chan flips the argument back around.

It’s an unexpected progression. This is what’s called a paraprosdokian.

‘And among those, there are even people who go as far as to say: “No, no, it may look like mutual support, but one side is obviously taking it easy”!’

‘.....’

Nadeko could say nothing in response to Koyomi Onii-chan’s exasperated tone.

If Hachikuji-chan, an elementary school girl said to be good friends with Koyomi Onii-chan, were here, she surely wouldn’t leave Koyomi Onii-chan to carry on like this on his own, but for Nadeko the most she could do was to simply watch over him.

She couldn’t even provide responses between his lines.

‘What a sad interpretation that is. Clearly anyone saying such a thing has not read novels. In print, the left and right of the kanji for person are properly symmetrical.’

‘.....’

Although actually the left is slightly thinner.

‘Or at the very least, couldn’t they say that when someone looks about to collapse, abandoning equality and fairness to volunteer to bear that burden is what a person is!?’

‘.....’

Something has perhaps happened to Koyomi Onii-chan in these past months... Not long ago, he hadn’t been the sort of person to say things like this even as a joke.

No.

Perhaps it’s just how much Nadeko has made Koyomi Onii-chan worry.

A shameful thought.

She really does feel remorse.

Next time she better not get caught.

For starters, it seems that she had best wait until her parents have gone to sleep before leaving.

‘Th-That’s right.’

While in her head she was thinking such things, Nadeko expresses agreement with Koyomi Onii-chan’s words.

‘It’s just as Koyomi Onii-chan says. From now on, if there’s something bad, rather than trying to bear it alone, Nadeko will go to Koyomi Onii-chan for advice.’

‘Right, you do that for me. For now, I bet you’re tired for today, so get some rest.’

‘Get some rest...?’

‘Wait a sec.’

Saying this, he went out of the room—with Nadeko being left alone in Koyomi Onii-chan’s room.

Where could he have gone?

‘H-Hey, Serpent-san... Are you all right? You’ve not been noticed, have you?’

Nadeko says to Serpent-san in a low voice.

‘Serpent-san...?’

Huh. There’s no response.

As though he really were only a scrunchie—a distasteful scrunchie—Serpent-san makes no movement from where he remained, bound about Nadeko wrist... Even shaking him, patting him, knocking him against things or prodding him with the trowel, he moved not a jot.

Why...?

Certainly, in front of people it’s better that he pretends to be an accessory, and with Koyomi Onii-chan possibly about to come back at any moment, staying still like this could be seen as “prudent”, but...

And then:

‘Back again.’

Koyomi Onii-chan returns.

He seems to be holding some kind of light kimono in one hand—it would appear to be a women’s yukata.

‘Here you go.’

‘?’

‘Nightwear. Borrowed from Tsukihi-chan.’

‘Eh...’

She’s at a loss for words.

By nightwear he means like pyjamas, doesn’t he?

It wasn’t nightcap that he meant to say, was it?

Well, it wouldn’t be good if he were offering a nightcap, but... Eh...? So, is Koyomi Onii-chan, by implication, telling Nadeko to stay the night?

‘Stay the night. It’s late already.’

Never mind by implication, he’s straight out said it.

It’s explicit.

‘And we’ve got to make things consistent with the lie Tsukihi-chan told.’

‘B-Borrowed from Ts-Ts-Tsukihi-chan... means...’

Nadeko says, while panicking a bit.

‘Koyomi Onii-chan did wake her after all...?’

‘Hmm? No, no, I went ahead and entered her room without asking, rummaged in her wardrobe without asking, looked closely at Tsukihi-chan and Karen-chan’s sleeping faces without asking and borrowed the nightwear without asking. Well, Tsukihi-chan wouldn’t mind.’

‘.....’

She has a feeling that somewhere in there was a superfluous step, but perhaps Nadeko was just imagining it, maybe.

However, staying the night?

She is unable to conceal her confusion at this most sudden of developments.

Even as she’s accepting the nightwear (having a yukata for nightwear—it’s like being at a ryokan) from Koyomi Onii-chan, she’s in panic mode.

‘Wh-Which room should Nadeko use?’

‘Eh? Which room? It’s not like our house has all that many rooms, so you’ll have to sleep here.’

‘In K-Koyomi Onii-chan’s room... in Koyomi Onii-chan’s bed?!’

Her panic kicked up a gear.

Although he hadn’t actually yet said she would be using his bed.

She’s rather getting ahead of herself.

‘Hm? Oh, well, yeah. You must be tired, so use the bed.’

She was right to jump the gun.

Nadeko’s on the ball today.

‘N-No... That won’t do. Koyomi Onii-chan should use the bed! N-N-N-Nadeko will be fine underneath it!’

‘What kind of idea is that...?’

You’re scaring me, says Koyomi Onii-chan.

Well, Koyomi Onii-chan wouldn’t be alone in being unable to sleep knowing someone was hidden underneath him.

‘Sleep on the bed. If it were heard that I’d made a middle school girl sleep under my bed, rather a large issue would be made of it. The sanctions I’d receive from the Fire Sisters don’t bear contemplating.’

‘B-But it wouldn’t be right for Nadeko alone to sleep in a bed, without regard for Koyomi Onii-chan.’

‘Oh, no, no, it’s fine.’

In the face of Nadeko’s continuing refusals, Koyomi Onii-chan wore a smile as if to say there were no problem at all.

‘Two can sleep in this bed.’

It was at that moment.

From Koyomi Onii-chan's shadow, cast onto the room's carpet, a little blonde vampire girl leaped out.

'Vampire punch!'

With that cry, she drove her fist into Koyomi Onii-chan's jaw.

A spectacular upper-cut.

'Guhaarr!'

Koyomi Onii-chan keeled over backward, laid out face up.

Too weak!

He went down like a character who appears at the start of a battle manga just to get done in. A fragility comparable to wet paper.

'Hmph!'

The little girl carried on upward, turned midair, and landed on the ceiling.

She was wearing a loose dress, but by skillfully gripping it between her thighs, she kept the hem in place.

Her hair was stood on end though.

...Back when Nadeko had seen this little girl before, she had been wearing a helmet—but it seems that helmet had already had its day.

Yes.

This vampire, no, ex-vampire, who had jumped from Koyomi Onii-chan's shadow, was Oshino Shinobu-san.

Using "san" for someone who looks like a little eight year old girl feels a bit awkward even to Nadeko, but in fact she was told Shinobu-san's actual age is five hundred years old, so never mind "san", perhaps she ought to be called "sama".

...Yes.

She's the same, in that sense, as Serpent-san—and now Nadeko understood why Serpent-san had been quiet for a while.

Serpent-san had been keeping a low profile, not because Koyomi Onii-chan had been around, but because *close-by* was Shinobu-san.

In terms of age, she believes Serpent-san has seniority, and set against Shinobu-san being a vampire, Serpent-san was a god, even if he had lost his faith, so there was a sense he didn't need to be quite so timid—but then again Shinobu-san is the "King of Oddities".

No Life King.

Meaning, all oddities are Shinobu-san's prey.

When it comes to who is the head of the food chain, it is indeed Shinobu-san who is worthy of the name—the likes of Serpent-san (especially at his current size) would probably be finished off in one gulp.

Swallowing a snake whole would be no joke.

You wouldn't laugh.

'Phew... 'Twas fair dangerous there.'

Shinobu-san says, wiping sweat off her brow, still in her stance on the ceiling.

Her manner is of someone just finishing some job.

'Near fell afoul of the Metropolitan Ordinance... Oh dear me. My liege's debauchery is enough to make this vampire blanch. I feared becoming anemic-blooded.'

'.....'

She's saying something rather worldly.

That's not very vampire-like, but supposedly she's heavily influenced by Koyomi Onii-chan, so perhaps the mistake would be in expecting nobility befitting her looks.

'Allez hop.'

With that, Shinobu-san descended from the ceiling.

With graceful, gymnastic movement she landed beside Koyomi Onii-chan.

And then she rubbed her own chin.

It's the same spot as where she had just struck on Koyomi Onii-chan's chin.

'With senses linked, my liege's pain becomes my own pain... Hm-hmm, but rendering him unconscious with no time to suffer, 'twould appear 'tis no issue.'

'.....'

Now she's saying something somewhat disturbing.

Koyomi Onii-chan's laid out still, not showing any motion, but is this what's meant in boxing when they talk about a blow to the jaw shaking the brain?

Having the brain shaken sounds like quite the dire condition.

It's the brain after all.

'Unscathed are you, Forelock Girl?'

Shinobu-san said, looking to Nadeko.

The look she gives doesn't particularly suggest much interest in Nadeko...

No—perhaps it's not exactly that she's not interested? Nadeko doesn't know quite how to put it. She struggles to read human emotions.

There's no way she could read those of a vampire.

'Risky business. 'Tis well I managed to be in time. You might, at your young years, have faced

giving birth to a child.'

'I-It could have gone that far...?'

'Well.'

Shinobu-san took a step closer toward Nadeko—unconsciously, Nadeko twitches.

'To look at you like this, to be sure, 'twould not be hard to understand—nor why my liege dotes on you. 'Tis quite the fine sculpting you have.'

'.....'

Being subjected to a close inspection is scary.

Considering she's a vampire.

Currently, she has lost her vampiric powers... but there's no hiding the fangs peeking out of her mouth, and she doesn't seem to have any intention of trying to.

Fangs.

Fangs different from a snake's.

'Hmm.'

Shinobu-san moves her face back away from Nadeko.

And said:

'The cutest after me!'

It's not quite clear from that assessment whether Nadeko has been paid a compliment or not.

Only, when Shinobu-san had taken a close look at Nadeko just now, this of course meant Nadeko had been given a close look at Shinobu-san's "sculpting"... and certainly Shinobu-san was captivatingly cute.

Far more so than Nadeko.

'Ah, um... Sh-Shinobu... -san.'

'Speak not my name so freely.'

She hadn't particularly had anything to say, but nevertheless Nadeko had unthinkingly—or somehow, anyway—tried to speak to Shinobu-san, only to be brushed off.

How to put it.

She had an uncompromising air.

'The more you humans call me by my name, the more strongly I am bound to it—well, not that I have thoughts any longer of taking back my name of old, however.'

As she says this, Shinobu-san pulls up Koyomi Onii-chan's prone body. Still unconscious, he droops limply, with no sign of waking.

'But regardless, I do not recall that I might be treated familiarly by a mere girl who has not lived even ten years.'

'.....'

Nadeko has lived ten years though. What with being a second year in middle school.

But after the rejection she had just been given, Nadeko was of course not feeling up to asserting her age to Shinobu-san. Not a bit.

It takes a lot to point out someone's mistake.

At the same time, Nadeko thought to herself, ah, this girl's become really talkative... In June, when they had met for the first time (though it's ambiguous whether they could really be said to have "met"), she had been a person even quieter than Nadeko, not speaking a single word.

Except she's a demon, not a person.

No, wasn't she now more than half human?

Not that Nadeko had been told the details... And not that Nadeko would be able to make heads or tails of it even if she had.

In any case, the fact was, Nadeko felt a touch of loneliness at Shinobu-san, who she had thought of as her fellow in silence, having become quite the talker.

Well, she was only saying that, and it wasn't especially like she had held a sense comradeship... In June too, she had only been glowered at and frightened.

Shinobu-san's "not saying anything because she was angry," and Nadeko's "not saying anything because she's scared and uncertain," are really nothing alike, are they...?

'Well, Forelock Girl—so my liege told you already, but you should sleep in that bed this night. I will take my liege downstairs, where he can sleep on a sofa, so be at ease.'

'...Th...'

Thank you, seems like a strange thing to say.

For Shinobu-san, rather than saving Nadeko, it must have been more a matter of saving Koyomi Onii-chan... So Nadeko changed what she had started to say.

'...Sorry.'

She said.

Quite why she is apologizing in this situation is unclear even to Nadeko, but if pushed she supposes it means: "Sorry you were put to such trouble all because of Nadeko."

'Hmm... 'Tis many an apology you make.'

'.....'

'But then, what of that? Is it out of regret that you apologize, or could it be with the thought: "Here the situation calls for an apology," as though 'twere read from a script? I wonder which it is.'

'.....'

'In the manner of saying good morning or good night, do you make your apologies, one wonders?'

'.....'

'Silence, is it? Well, about that, I am in no position to say aught—having myself long held my own tongue, just so.'

'.....'

'—Ka ka!'

Shinobu-san, whatever it was she found funny, laughed at Nadeko—who could only wait, her eyes cast down, for Shinobu-san to take Koyomi Onii-chan out of the room.

It could have been a chuckle.

But the closest description may be a cackle.

She was being looked down upon—she felt.

‘Ka ka ka—ka ka! Ka ka ka ka ka!’

‘...? Uh-Uhm...’

Rather than remain silent, Nadeko decides to ask.

Though she could just let it lie, she will ask.

Perhaps because she knows they’re linked, being laughed at by Shinobu-san like this—it’s almost as though she’s being laughed at by Koyomi Onii-chan.

She knows that’s not right—but even so.

She couldn’t help but ask.

And also—she had an apprehension. Though Serpent-san on Nadeko’s wrist was maintaining his pretense of being a scrunchie, no matter how well he performed that mimicry, there was no guarantee that this would work on Shinobu-san.

She didn’t think that Shinobu-san, now that she had a good relationship with Koyomi Onii-chan would indiscriminately eat Serpent-san... But it wouldn’t be strange for Shinobu-san to think it suspicious that Nadeko has an oddity bound onto her wrist.

Perhaps, after Koyomi Onii-chan returns to consciousness, precisely because their relationship is good, it would be the sort of thing Shinobu-san would tell him of...

‘I-Is something... funny?’

‘Funny? Hmm, ’tis nothing funny. I simply laugh out of appreciation. Indeed, did I not say earlier? That I understood the reason my liege would dote on you...?’

‘.....’

Her liege, without needing to confirm, must mean Koyomi Onii-chan, but... why was it?

That through Shinobu-san’s words, Koyomi Onii-chan sounded like a person in a very distant place from Nadeko.

“Twas that once more, I was made cognizant of why. That way you hang your head, so nervous and frail, and with all your body saying: “See how pitiable a wretch I am,” and with your eyes cast downward—not only in my liege, but in even as fiendish an existence as myself, a protective instinct is evoked...’

‘.....’

Pitiable. A pitiable—kid.

‘When it comes to fiendish—Forelock Girl, ought I speak of how adorable “cuteness” can be a fair fiendish weapon?’

Shinobu-san continues with her taunting.

Yes.

Her smile now, different from when she had cackled just before, was probably the one that Koyomi Onii-chan calls a “ghastly grin”—in June, Shinobu-san had been a vampire who showed not even a twitch of a smile, but it appears that by wearing one, she may in fact become all the more frightful.

‘That the young of animals—well, ’tis also true of human children—arouse a protective instinct through appearance and behavior, is a weapon by which the weak might survive. Nay, ’tis perhaps not limited to the weak? I myself, will have my opponents lowering their guard at this cute appearance—Hmm. That Ononoki girl too, is of the same sort.’

‘.....’

‘Mimicry—it might even be called. The opposite of warning coloration?’

Shinobu-san looks at Nadeko’s right wrist, smirking, it seemed—or maybe she didn’t. Perhaps it was just Nadeko’s imagination.

Perhaps with something to be guilty about, she was just being excessively self-conscious...

Regardless, her body trembles.

Her tongue feels tied and she doubts she could speak.

““Cuteness” is a weapon to rival “strength”—that I am the most powerful for possessing both, is of course not what I wish to talk about. For that goes without saying. What I speak of, is that merely by doing naught but quailing so, you make one lose the will to kill you, and what a boon that is for you.’

‘.....’

That’s—no.

Is that... a boon?

Nadeko, timid, quiet and poor at socializing—people assume she’s “trustworthy” and a “good kid”—and so she gets the role of class rep pushed onto her or asked to do tasks she’s unsuited to...

There are only downsides. She just ends up betraying expectations.

Disappointing people—really is hard to bear.

‘I-It’s... not a boon.’

‘Oh, is that so? Hmm? Merely by keeping silent, are you not treated kindly by all? Merely keeping silent, are you not thought smart? Merely keeping silent, are you not thought sage? If you cannot do a thing, are you not smiled upon? Merely by staying quiet, can you not weather what you wish not to face? Merely doing the same as others, is your appreciation not the greater? Saying the same as others, are your words not better received? Should you make mistakes, do you not avoid rebuke? Even if you speak lies, do you not receive forgiveness?’

‘...Th-That’s...’

Nadeko shakes her head.

‘That’s—horrible. That’s not a good thing, it’s... Th-That’s like it’s just a kind of discrimination, so N-Nadeko—’

‘Should you be distressed...’

The objection Nadeko had managed to get out.

Went unheard by Shinobu-san—ignoring Nadeko, like Nadeko wasn't even there, Shinobu-sar continues.

‘Will someone not take it upon themselves to help you, hmm?—Should there be strife, are you not taken to be the victim?’

‘.....’

‘Hmm. I had thought that, perhaps, you were consciously acting so, but 'twould appear not. Meaning that naturally, without particular effort, that cuteness and bearing is achieved? For those of us devoted to self-improvement, 'tis the height of envy.’

Shinobu-san says, not seeming at all envious.

The impression of her looking down on Nadeko has not remotely diminished.

If anything, it has only increased.

‘By the by, do you know what that which is “cute by nature”, like yourself, is called in Japanese?’

‘.....’

‘Oi, oi, you were asked a question—you could answer it.’

Oh, but.

It's not an easy thing to answer.

‘N-No... Fi... “Fiendish”?’

“Tis devilish.’

Shinobu-san stated, clipped and firmly.

Devilish. Devilish?

‘Which is to say that you are even more fey than an oddity—ka ka ka!’

Once again Shinobu-san laughed.

‘Nay, no fear. Forgive me—I said more than I ought. Just what am I saying to a mere human, indeed? You are well as you are. Live on as you are. ’Tis nothing I know. Live on as you are, and as you are, die. ’Twould be well to spend your whole life thus, in receipt of Koyomi Onii-chan’s worry.’

And at last, Shinobu-san leaves the room, weighed down by Koyomi Onii-chan and rather dragging him.

From the hallway, Shinobu-san turns back and then said, with eyes that did not just look down at Nadeko, but that seemed to hold wholehearted contempt.

‘What luck. To just happen to be cute.’

The next morning, Nadeko woke to find Tsukihi-chan sleeping beside her.

‘.....’

Just because she didn’t scream, that doesn’t mean it wasn’t a shock.

She was too shocked to make a sound.

Ultra-shocked.

If anything, she gave out an ultrasonic scream.

She thought she might destroy her throat, her lungs.

Another Araragi sibling who wanted to sleep with Nadeko... Tsukihi-chan was sound asleep and hugging Nadeko like a sleeping pillow.

She couldn’t move.

An explanation may be required, while it’s repeating what’s been stated already, but Tsukihi-chan is scary. Her ferociousness is famed amongst middle schoolers.

Her fitfulness could be compared to a nuclear weapon.

Who could know the terror of waking up to find themselves being embraced by a nuclear weapon...? Well, the image of being embraced by a nuclear weapon is a bit “surreal” though.

This is Nadeko, the girl who hates being touched by people. No matter who it is, even if they’re her parents, she feels repulsed by it. But being pinned tightly like this, moreover by Tsukihi-chan, there’s nothing she can do.

She can only turn ashen-faced.

‘...Mm.’

But while Nadeko is doing that—that is to say, doing nothing—Tsukihi-chan woke up.

‘...Huh? Uwa! Nadeko-chan!’

‘.....’

‘What a shock!’

Tsukihi-chan had sprung awake.

And backing off from Nadeko, she had tumbled out of the bed in her overreaction... Seeing her like this, she really is completely different from Nadeko.

Could they truly be the same age, and truly girls alike?

‘Wh-Why is Nadeko-chan in Onii-chan’s bed!? I was supposed to be hugging Onii-chan!’

‘.....’

Now there’s an off-putting admission.

It would seem that Tsukihi-chan had, at dawn, climbed into Koyomi Onii-chan’s bed while half-asleep. It’s reportedly the case that Koyomi Onii-chan is usually woken by Tsukihi-chan and Karen-san... But perhaps that isn’t the only thing that can happen.

Perhaps sometimes more than that happens.

For now, Nadeko checks the room.

Hmm, it would appear that Karen-san isn't here...

‘...Morning, Tsukihi-chan.’

Says Nadeko.

It is morning after all.

‘Oh, yes... Morning, Nadeko-chan.’

By the way, back when they were in elementary school, they had called each other “Sen-chan” and “Rara-chan”, but since that’s somewhat childish, these days they call each other by given name.

Ah, n-no.

Now’s really not the time for such exposition.

Tsukihi-chan picks herself up—she stands while adjusting the hem of her yukata, which had become disarrayed in her tumble. Her yukata is a match for the one Nadeko is wearing, which gives Nadeko rather an odd feeling.

It seems Tsukihi-chan is in the same position—or no, in fact all the more for her—from her perspective it would seem that Nadeko had taken one of her yukata to wear (since timewise, it would seem doubtful that Koyomi Onii-chan had furnished her with an explanation) and so:

‘?’

She looks at Nadeko quizzically.

She has a face like she’s wondering whether she’s not quite woken up and isn’t still dreaming.

While that’s not the case, her characteristic downturned eyes, as mentioned by Koyomi Onii-chan, do make her look awfully sleepy.

‘A-Ah... Uh-um, this... isn’t...’

While becoming flustered, Nadeko tries to explain.

What she fears most right now, is Tsukihi-chan coming to the misunderstanding:

“Nadeko took Tsukihi-chan’s yukata and slept in Koyomi Onii-chan’s bed of her own accord.”

If Tsukihi-chan, with her propensity for extreme (ahem) brocon, were to misunderstand that, in the worst case Nadeko could find herself the enemy of all local middle school kids.

A fate worse than possession by an oddity.

‘U-Um... Tsukihi-chan, Koyomi Onii-chan told Nadeko...’

‘Nadeko-chan! Don’t tell me you disguised yourself as me to make a move on Onii-chan!?’

‘.....’

The degree of misunderstanding easily surpassed the category of Nadeko’s expectations.

Truly a fearsome sister...

Correction, fearsome siblings.

Like brother, like sister.

‘I knew you had it in you!’

Giving a thumbs up, for some reason Tsukihi-chan looked quite happy—it seems that, while there’s

been something of a misunderstanding, Nadeko's been granted approval.

Tsukihi-chan's an unpredictable one...

What will put her in good or bad mood, is hard to grasp.

'Wh... Where's Karen-san?'

Nadeko asked nervously.

The Fire Sisters supposedly act generally together, so just because Karen-san's not here now doesn't mean Nadeko can relax.

If she's been let off by Tsukihi-chan, the brains behind the outfit, she thinks she ought to be in the clear, but it would be good to have peace of mind.

If she isn't careful she might get kicked before she has a chance to explain.

'Hm, I don't know... Maybe jogging, I think...'

Oh, what's this?

That's a bit of a vague response—from what Nadeko had heard tell of, were the Fire Sisters not one in body and soul?

Or perhaps, more recently, something had happened.

Something that could bring change to the relationship of the Fire Sisters—not necessarily a fight or a rift.

'Anyways, Nadeko-chan, good to see you!'

A little late, but Tsukihi-chan gets round to giving a greeting—well, late as it may be, manners are manners.

They may have shared a bed, but it's said even close relationships have need of good manners. Nadeko and Tsukihi-chan, while they had been classmates in the past, were now at different schools and weren't even all that close, so it wouldn't do to dispense with etiquette.

'I-It's good to see you too.'

Said Nadeko.

She has her head bowed deeply—this posture also carries the emotion of being embarrassed at having her face seen just after waking.

'Yup.'

Tsukihi-chan smiles.

This is also a little late, but Tsukihi-chan has changed her hairstyle in the time since Nadeko had last seen her—well, Tsukihi-chan changes hairstyles like changing clothes, so in that sense too, it's a bit late to be pointing that out.

Nadeko's no expert on fashion, so she wouldn't know what to call it, but it's a hairstyle that's sort of "choppy" here and there.

It's a hairstyle nicely straddling stylish and avant garde... A hairstyle that looks like it would require some attention, and not something Nadeko could pull off.

Come to that, Nadeko simply lets her fringe grow longer, and just does what she can by herself to

even up the rest of it.

She's never been to a salon. She wouldn't want someone touching her hair or her scalp... Even putting that aside, she wouldn't be able to stand having the hairdresser try to make small talk while she were having her hair cut.

Though since she's never been, the small talk and such are just how she imagines it to be.

'Ah, I get it. I've finally started to think straight. Onii-chan must have found Nadeko-chan and brought you back home with him. So Onii-chan must've let you have the bed and slept downstairs. What a gentleman.'

Ohhh. As expected of the brains of the Fire Sisters.

So close.

Other than Koyomi Onii-chan being a gentleman, she's pretty much right.

'S-Sorry, Tsukihi-chan... For being a nuisance to you. Making you lie. It must've been a nuisance, wasn't it? Mom or Dad calling you in the middle of the night...'

'Ahaha, it was hardly what I'd call the middle of the night! I was just listening to the radio. And I'm used to making alibis for friends, so no worries.'

'.....'

That's a rather untoward admission, but since she had been aided by that impropriety of Tsukihi-chan's, Nadeko could hardly pass comment.

It's a shame for her parents though.

'Nadeko-chan's not a child anymore, right, so I said you'd be fine, but then, y'know, Onii-chan went looking for you anyway—he's a worrier who gets overprotective, I know, but the fact that he actually found you, well, Onii-chan's pretty amazing, right?'

'Y-Yep... Koyomi Onii-chan's amazing.'

Nadeko agreed.

But something bothered Nadeko about Tsukihi-chan's words—or rather, not her words themselves, but something from last night that they brought back to mind...

"Worrier" and "overprotective".

Overmeddling.

Koyomi Onii-chan.

But the reason Koyomi Onii-chan thinks of Nadeko like that...

'Hmm? What's wrong, Nadeko-chan? Are you not feeling well? The way you're hunched over, that cute face of yours is going to waste.'

'C-Cute face...'

Don't say things like that, Nadeko says, lowering her head further.

Last night she hadn't been able to get out even so much as this objection.

'Don't say things like that... There's no way it's cute.'

‘Huh?’

Tsukihi-chan tilts her head.

‘N-Nadeko... isn’t cute at all.’

‘Eh, what’re you saying? Of course you’re cute? Nadeko-chan’s cute. Like, seriously cute, like super-cute, like, calling you the very cutest living thing on Earth isn’t exaggeration? Like, acutely adorably cute, like, cutely, cutely, cutely cute? That March at the start of the 2nd year of elementary school, when we joined the same class, I thought straight away: whoa, she’s cute!’

It was an assault by Tsukihi-chan’s crashing waves of “cute”, as though to blank out Nadeko’s faint words. More than flinching, she wanted curl her whole body up under the bed cover.

Embarrassing... hardly begins to describe it.

‘You’re the cutest after me!’

‘.....’

She’s saying the same as a vampire.

Drowsy though she seems, she’s got fearsome pride. Great self-esteem.

Perhaps Tsukihi-chan is also an oddity?

It’s not all that implausible. In many ways, she is a touch otherworldly.

‘As soon as I saw you, I thought, ah, I gotta make friends with her! If I don’t make friends with her it’ll be a big loss to my life!’

‘...S-So...’

Nadeko asks.

Something which could be left unasked.

‘I-If Nadeko weren’t cute... would Tsukihi-chan not have become Nadeko’s friend... then?’

‘Um?’

Nadeko had asked the question with her eyes still down, but even without looking at Tsukihi-chan, she could tell she was obviously baffled.

Saying baffled makes it sound better than it was.

The word itself was a girlish “Um?” but in terms of intonation, in fact it might be said to have been something like Serpent-san’s oft used:

“Aaan?”

As though to say: “What’s this idiot on about?”

This is the scary side of Tsukihi-chan.

The likes of delinquents are no match.

‘Say what? What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘S-Sorry... I-It’s nothing.’

‘Don’t give me sorry. And don’t tell me it’s nothing. I asked you what you meant. Are you going to tell me, huh, Nadeko-chan?’

‘.....’

Nadeko's scared. Why is this happening first thing in the morning?

‘What? Didn't you hear me? Are you not listening to me? Or maybe it's that you can't answer, or don't want to?’

‘S... Sorry.’

‘Look, I told you I don't want sorry. What is it? Something wrong with the way I'm asking you? Is it my fault? Or is there something you feel guilty about which you're apologizing for? Has Nadeko-char done something to make you feel bad for me, is that it? Or you're thinking something to feel bad about?’

‘...N-No...’

Nadeko's scared, scared, scared.

This isn't how middle school girls quarrel.

No, see, Tsukihi-chan's even clenching her fist.

With her eyes cast downward, avoiding looking at Tsukihi-chan's face, Nadeko could see Tsukihi-chan's lap, and there on her lap, she's got her fist clenched very, very hard.

And it's not that she's just squeezing her hand in anger—it's a kenpo fist, with the thumb outside, strongly conveying: “Depending on the answer, I'll punch her.”

And: “If there's no answer, I'll punch her,” too...

Nadeko's scared.

But along with that fear, there's also amazement—it's far from the time to be thinking it, but that's how she feels.

Tsukihi-chan's amazing. She really is.

It's amazing she's popular, with a personality like this.

She must have a great many “good points” about her, to make up for this personality—Nadeko thinks.

Yes.

That's right—*besides her cuteness*.

‘All right. I'll hit you. In the stomach.’

‘Wait, wait, wait! Nadeko will tell you!’

Seeing Tsukihi-chan, her anger having apparently exceeded some threshold, rise straight to her feet with a look of resolve, Nadeko puts her hands up to signal her surrender, and spoke with a fluency and so loud a voice as to normally be unthinkable.

‘W-Well, you see? That's sort of what Nadeko got told. A certain person said: “What luck that you just happen to be cute.”’

To be precise, they weren't a person, but a vampire, but of course she couldn't tell Tsukihi-chan that much—if she told the truth it would sound like she was lying.

She would be punched. In the stomach. In it not being the face, there was a sense of genuine intent.

“What luck that you just happen to be cute”?

‘Y-Yep... th-that’s it. That’s a good impersonation. Exactly alike.’

‘Ah, I wasn’t actually trying to do an impersonation...’

But Tsukihi-chan blushes, seemingly not minding taking the compliment, and from standing returns to sitting on the floor.

She seems to be weak to flattery.

Though, in actuality, it wasn’t an exact quote of the original, so it wasn’t really the same.

Correctly it was: “What luck. To just happen to be cute.”

Shinobu-san had displayed a thin smile—and told her that.

‘A-And... that’s not the first time that sort of thing’s been said to Nadeko... From pretty far back, people have said things like that. Stuff like, you’re only cute... Or, you’re only looks...’

You’re only cute.

The person who said that—was her friend.

The girl she had thought was her friend.

The one Nadeko had thought she got on best with—

And the one who put the “charm” on her.

‘Or that “it’s unfair that you don’t have to do anything”—’

‘I see... But, so, isn’t that basically just jealousy?’

Says Tsukihi-chan.

‘If you try swapping it around, you can see how weird what they’re saying is. Like, “What luck that you just happen to be good at studying,” or “What luck that you just happen to run fast,” or “What luck that you just happen to be rich,” and so on—if you start saying that, then everything in the world is just how it happens to be.’

‘...Well, yep, that’s true.’

‘And, like, even I “just happen to be Onii-chan’s sister.”’

‘.....’

So what Tsukihi-chan brings up first as her greatest gift, is being Koyomi Onii-chan’s sister...

Quite formidable. What kind of self-assessment is that?

‘It’s not something to care about, is it? I’d thought that Nadeko-chan going out last night wasn’t running away or anything like that—but, what, were you really running away from home, perhaps because of someone telling you that?’

‘N-No...’

The order was the other way round.

Only, the shock from hearing those words from Shinobu-san was certainly enough to make her want to run away—not the words themselves, but the animosity they were filled with.

Animosity intending to wound Nadeko.

It was a shock.

‘Nadeko-chan. I don’t think there’s any point in actually responding to whether I’d be your friend or not if you weren’t cute—if anything there are problems with a question like that even coming up, so I’m not going to answer.’

‘.....’

‘But if you still insisted on wanting me to answer, then I’d have to say: “We wouldn’t have become friends.” Yeah? So what? Is that what you want me to say? Will hearing that make you happy? Do you want to make me say it? Do you win if you make me say that?’

‘Th-That’s not it...’

‘Oh, so that’s not it? Okay, then, do you mean you hate yourself for being cute?’

‘I-It’s not like... But being told that’s all you are...’

Is horrible, she says.

She says it in a tiny voice, so perhaps Tsukihi-chan wouldn’t have heard.

So she continues. Sounding forced.

‘It w-would be nice... if Nadeko had some worth of a sort that couldn’t be seen.’

‘Worth?’

‘L-Like being good at studying or good at sport... Or having a nice personality. Anything is fine even if it’s something to just happen to be, if it’s that sort of... thing with worth... Like, um, some kind of talent...’

‘It just seems the same to me...’

Tsukihi-chan, as if to say she was through with being angry, shrugged her shoulders.

‘Talented people might think the same sort of thing too. And if they’re told: “Yeah, but you’re not cute,” they’d probably be hurt. But then, you don’t get anywhere rejecting who you are.’

‘B-But it’s not like Nadeko... wanted to be cute.’

That’s why.

She hates having people tell her—that she benefits from being cute, that it’s unfair, that it’s cheating. Actually, no, she doesn’t hate it.

What it is—is tiresome.

It wears on her, physically and emotionally.

‘...Being favored for just being cute...’

‘Makes you feel guilty.’

Tsukihi-chan preempts Nadeko’s words.

Insightful—it’s not. Not particularly on this point.

It’s something anyone could understand. Besides Nadeko.

‘So, Nadeko-chan, is that why you’re growing your fringe long and hiding your face?’

‘.....’

‘I’d thought it was shyness that made you not want to make eye contact... But, Nadeko-chan, even if you hide your face, you can’t hide the way you act, y’know? Or hide your voice? Like, everything that comes from Nadeko-chan is cute.’

‘.....’

‘Well, anyone and everyone wishes for what they don’t have—Karen-chan’s bothered about being too tall and even I have times when I wish I wasn’t Onii-chan’s little sister.’

Her gift and curse are the same and both are Koyomi Onii-chan. That’s what’s so off-putting. No need to lay it all bare, please.

Just what’s supposed to have happened if she hadn’t been Koyomi Onii-chan’s sister...?

‘I see. So that’s why you’re growing your fringe long.’

Tsukihi-chan says, as if to reaffirm it.

‘And that’ll also be why you never dress fashionably—wearing all those lame clothes.’

‘.....’

No.

Her clothes aren’t exactly...

‘And putting on that distasteful scrunchie.’

‘.....’

‘So that’s what that was about—right, yeah, then putting that together too, I’m going to offer you just one piece of advice.’

‘A-Advice?’

‘Yeah. Listen real carefully. Okay, so...’

Tsukihi-chan says with a nod.

And together with a broad smile.

‘I get what Nadeko-chan is trying to say, but still, it’s Nadeko-chan’s fault for being nothing but cute, stoopid!’

‘.....!’

A cleaving blow.

At the remark’s brutality, she couldn’t even register shock.

It took a moment to accept that she couldn’t have misheard.

But also, she thinks, Tsukihi-chan really is amazing—faced with Nadeko’s moping, she hasn’t offered one word of kindness or consolation.

No, she really, truly is amazing.

And when Nadeko thinks of how she, on the other hand, had been saying this and that, while in the end she had been seeking to be comforted and consoled, well, of course she would feel ashamed of herself.

‘If you don’t want to be favored and praised only for being “cute” then you just gotta work on being

something besides “cute”. Make an effort and work hard. Why’d you try to stop being “cute” instead? Like, that’s totally the wrong way round? I don’t get it.’

‘...M-Make an effort and work hard...?’

‘Yeah. Like everyone does, y’know?’

‘.....’

When it’s put to her so flatly, she has nothing to say to it.

Well, it’s a sound point though...

Very, very sound, it may be.

‘B-But, Tsukihi-chan.’

‘Yes?’

‘M-Making an effort and working hard... isn’t that... tiresome?’

‘.....’

Tsukihi-chan is silent a moment.

‘That’s Nadeko-chan all right.’

She then says.

‘The way you see everything as a hassle... your slacker side, is something I kinda like.’

‘.....’

‘But I wonder about that. It’s not something I’d know about, but how does it feel having a flaw viewed positively?’

‘Eh?’

Nadeko blurts at Tsukihi-chan’s words.

A flaw viewed positively?

‘Like, you’re messy but I like that! Or, I like that you’re rude, I like that you’ve got baggage, I like that you’re clumsy. I wonder what it feels like being told something like that. Is it unpleasant or reassuring?’

‘.....’

‘Anyway, who was it that said that to you?’

‘Ah, wh-who...’

Tsukihi-chan hadn’t waited for Nadeko’s answer before moving on to her next question.

‘Who isn’t, um, easy to say...’

‘Was it Onii-chan, maybe?’

‘N-No... No, Koyomi Onii-chan would never say such a thing...’

Koyomi Onii-chan seemed at risk of being tarred with a false allegation, so Nadeko tries to make a firm denial. But given that it had come from Shinobu-san, a vampire linked spiritually to Koyomi Onii-chan, perhaps she couldn’t say it with as much conviction as she intended.

It wasn’t exactly because of that, but Nadeko does add to what she said, as though to back it up.

‘K-Koyomi Onii-chan is kind...’

‘Yeah. I know about Onii-chan’s kindness. I know it best.’

But that can be why he sometimes says too much—said Tsukihi-chan.

‘Things better left unsaid—y’know? Or things you’d rather not hear—maybe.’

‘.....’

‘Anyway, Nadeko-chan, you’ve got a crush on Onii-chan, right?’

Suddenly, the hidden ball trick.

And a fastball at that.

Just when you think you’re playing baseball, next thing you know it’s a dodgeball match.

Except no, it’s not dodgeball, because it feels like what she’s been hit with is a hardball.

‘Wh-Whatever might you mean...?’

Shaken, she found herself speaking funny.

She’s like the culprit in an old mystery novel.

Though in a sense that’s actually quite apt...

‘D-Do you have any proof...?’

‘Look, you don’t need to hide it. Anyone could see it. It’s obvious. It’s probably only Onii-chan who hasn’t noticed.’

‘.....’

‘So, Nadeko-chan, you weren’t happy getting to sleep in Onii-chan’s bed last night? Or—’

Says Tsukihi-chan.

No.

Nadeko’s not that sort of indecent girl, who might have taken off her yukata for a moment to be naked in the bed, she thought of saying, but she couldn’t get the words out.

She’s not quite panicking, but she’s one step away.

‘—If Onii-chan had told you: “You’re lucky you’re cute,” you’d not worry about it like this, or be thinking these things?’

‘...That’s not it.’

But while she said that, it may well be true that after being told that by Shinobu-san, Nadeko had felt a darkness fall on her heart.

It’s just.

‘It’s just, it could be that, maybe the reason Koyomi Onii-chan would do things like worry about Nadeko or go out at night to search for Nadeko, is only because Nadeko is “cute”, perhaps...’

‘If there’s nothing else good about you, maybe so.’

She was cutting.

Truly, Tsukihi-chan hasn’t a scrap of “mercy” in her.

Where in her can the sister to Koyomi Onii-chan be found... Well, actually, her face has rather a resemblance.

‘Onii-chan can’t resist a cute girl, after all... I kid, I kid. But, well, I don’t think it’s that. Onii-chan will save anyone, you see. So to him, Nadeko-chan’s cuteness doesn’t mean anything.’

‘.....’

‘Not too happy with that either? You can’t have it both ways.’

‘No, no, it’s not that...’

It was just that she had been thinking about whether it was what Shinobu-san had said or what Tsukihi-chan had said that was right—though, probably, it wasn’t a matter of which was right and which was wrong, she thought.

Shinobu-san was linked to him.

Tsukihi-chan was his sister—it was simply that, respectively, they each had their own viewpoint and each their own interpretation, and so Nadeko ought to also have her own viewpoint and interpretation—

But Nadeko had nothing. No interpretation at all.

Her own thoughts, her own ideas.

She was foregoing them.

‘And, well, Nadeko-chan, in any case, we can turn it back around and, well, maybe it’s because I’m the little sister of “Koyomi Onii-chan” that Nadeko-chan’s friends with me, y’know?’

‘Eh? Th-That’s...’

She becomes flustered.

And what comes to mind, is the rumor about that girl—about how she became Nadeko’s friend to get closer to the boy she liked.

That comes to her mind—and she grows even more flustered.

‘Th-That’s not how it was... The order was the other way... N-Nadeko met Tsukihi-chan in elementary school, became friends with you first, then came here to play and met Koyomi Onii-chan...’

‘Uh-huh. But after the 1st term this year, we started seeing each other again because of Onii-chan, right? So doesn’t that make it because I’m Onii-chan’s sister?’

‘.....’

‘...You see?’

Having absorbed Nadeko’s silence, Tsukihi-chan changes her voice in an about-face from her hard tone.

‘Having someone say something like that isn’t very nice, is it? Whatever the truth is, doesn’t matter—and that’s exactly the sort of thing you said to me, isn’t it? Without thinking about how I’d feel.’

‘...Sorry.’

No.

It's not like it's an apology that Tsukihi-chan's after—

‘B-But it really isn't just because Tsukihi-chan is Koyomi Onii-chan's sister that Nadeko is friends with you... well, though Tsukihi-chan's scary...’

‘Eh?’

‘N-No, Tsukihi-chan's cary, was what that was supposed to be...’

‘What's “cary”...?’

She couldn't fob her off like that.

However, now that it's been put to her, Nadeko couldn't really claim that what Tsukihi-chan had said was entirely off the mark—the order may have been the other way round, but there was no mistake in that Nadeko, who had been just as unsociable back in the 2nd year of elementary school, had often accepted invitations to come play at Tsukihi-chan's house, not solely due to Tsukihi-chan's forcefulness, but also because of Koyomi Onii-chan.

In that sense, Nadeko.

Was in no position to make complaints or “gripe”.

Yes. Not even about that friend.

‘Anyway, I've been meaning to ask if the chance came up, because I've wondered—Nadeko-chan, why were you attracted to Onii-chan?’

‘Wh-Why...?’

‘Ah, no, never mind why you were. There must have been some kinda thing that'd do it. Back then In elementary school. Onii-chan's good looking, after all. And he's kind. And he's wonderful. And he used to be smart.’

‘.....’

That's quite the way to praise one's own brother.

Nadeko's slightly afraid. Well, no—not just slightly anymore.

‘People don't need a reason to be attracted to a person... And if you turn that around, then no matter what the reason, it's fine to be attracted to someone. Whether it's because they're “cute” or they're “someone's sister” or for any reason. Only—Nadeko-chan, after that, what's the reason you went on crushing on him for as long as six years?’

‘Eh...’

‘The only time Nadeko-chan had contact with Onii-chan had been when you were in the 2nd year of elementary school, right? Just when he was in the 6th year, right? When Onii-chan moved into middle school, he started acting like he was too cool to play with younger girls... So for the rest of those six years, Nadeko-chan wouldn't ever even have met Onii-chan. So despite that, how did you keep your feelings for him?’

‘.....’

‘I mean, from where I'm looking, I get the feeling that's easily going beyond what'd be called single-minded...’

In fact.

When he had met Nadeko again for the first time in six years—Koyomi Onii-chan had completely forgotten her.

Which was perfectly natural, so no one could really say it was cold of Koyomi Onii-chan or that he had a poor memory—at least, Nadeko didn’t think it was something he should be faulted for.

It was Nadeko who had one-sidedly not forgotten.

Bizarrely, never forgetting.

‘Um, th-that’s... But...’

Begins Nadeko.

Trying to justify herself.

‘But even after entering the 3rd year, Nadeko would still hear rumors about Koyomi Onii-chan... Like, you know it was when he was in middle school that he was most active, wasn’t it?’

Just like Tsukihi-chan and Karen-chan became most active as the “Fire Sisters” when you entered middle school, said Nadeko, rambling on.

Of course, hearing Nadeko suddenly talking at length, Tsukihi-chan made no effort to hide the suspicious look she was giving her.

But with an ‘I guess,’ she agrees.

How lively—rascally, you might say instead—Koyomi Onii-chan had been during middle school, was something Tsukihi-chan, being his sister, would know best of all.

*So as an excuse:*

It ought to have some measure of persuasiveness.

‘Even after he became a high school student... well, Onii-chan was a celebrity of sorts, yeah. For some reason he himself seems to think he’s just a normal, unremarkable high school kid though.’

‘With Koyomi Onii-chan, the notion of a normal, unremarkable high school kid seems to be considerably different...’

‘Yeah, true... Could be it’s just how everyone goes and thinks their own standard is what’s normal. Like, no matter how cute they are, they go around saying they’re not.’

‘.....’

All right, it was something Nadeko shouldn’t have said, and perhaps she had been venting at Tsukihi-chan, but Tsukihi-chan is going on a bit.

In contrast to the way Karen-san gets things off her chest, Tsukihi-chan rather does hold on.

It would be nice if she would let Nadeko go soon.

‘Y-Yep... So it’s not particularly strange. Having feelings for someone for just six years is pretty normal.’

‘Just six years...? But for someone our age, that’s close to half a lifetime...’

Hmm, says Tsukihi-chan.

And then:

‘Look, this is just to make sure, but...’

She shuffles over toward Nadeko.

Approaching the bed on all fours, in a way that lets her look up into Nadeko’s downcast eyes from below—with her in that pose, Nadeko can’t hide her expression.

‘Your crush on Onii-chan—we’re talking *that*, right? It’s not, like, just a crush on a nice older boy or as a friend, right?’

‘.....’

‘It’s sexual, right?’

‘S-Sexual?’

‘My mistake. I mean, it’s as a member of the opposite sex, right?’

‘Y... Yep.’

‘It’s not that you wish you were in a position like mine or Karen-chan’s—you want to go out with Onii-chan and, like, be lovers with him? Those are the kind of feelings you have for him, right?’

‘Y-Yep... That’s right.’

‘You want to make out with him, right?’

‘Y-Yep... Right.’

‘Go all the way?’

‘Yes...’

Pressured by the chain of questions, Nadeko could answer no other way.

Serpent-san on her right wrist—

Says nothing and does nothing.

Acting like he’s not even there.

Hearing Nadeko and Tsukihi-chan—this conversation between two middle school girls, what must he be thinking?

‘N-Nadeko... is in love with Koyomi Onii-chan. Loves him... as a man.’

‘Okay.’

Tsukihi-chan acknowledges, and still looking right at Nadeko’s expression, she continued.

In this situation, it was the sort of atmosphere where she might be expected to say something like: “Then I’ll support you! Leave it to me to set things up!” But, hold on there, what Tsukihi-chan said was close to the complete opposite of that.

Well, she is Tsukihi-chan.

‘But Onii-chan has a girlfriend?’

Nadeko could tell her own pupils had dilated.

And that her facial muscles had stiffened.

And she felt the corners of her mouth twitch—an autonomic reaction, it wasn't something she could stop even if she tried.

And the gulp of her throat—that too.

All this was closely observed by Tsukihi-chan.

It felt like an eternity had passed, but it must in reality have been only an instant, briefer than momentary—Tsukihi-chan, after blinking just once, narrowed her eyes.

‘Hmm.’

She said.

‘So, you did know.’

‘.....’

‘It’s that kind of reaction. Rather than being “surprised”, it was more like you’d been “seen through”—well, Onii-chan does often end up being the subject of rumors. Like, maybe it’d be hard not to hear, just simply by living in this town. And I guess unlike with me and Karen-chan, he didn’t hide it from Nadeko-chan.’

Saying this, Tsukihi-chan left her position below Nadeko and stood up.

Fearing she might again intend to punch Nadeko, Nadeko braced herself for a moment, but instead Tsukihi-chan opened the room’s door.

Nadeko thought she might have been leaving, sick of dealing with Nadeko, but it turned out she was simply checking the hallway.

After looking around—presumably making sure Koyomi Onii-chan and Karen-chan weren’t around—she closed the door and went back to where she had been.

Actually, not quite where she had been.

She’s on the bed—Tsukihi-chan sat now with her eye level the same as Nadeko’s.

As the bed was springy, the surface could be felt to wobble—though the way Nadeko was feeling, everything, even the ground, would seem to rock unsteadily.

She’s close.

And frightening.

You might well be thinking Nadeko’s being rather too afraid of a friend, but then you can try being here in Nadeko’s place, please.

‘Right then, Nadeko-chan.’

Tsukihi-chan says. Fixing her gaze straight on Nadeko.

‘Between us girls, let’s have a heart-to-heart.’

‘.....’

Has this scene still got more to go?

Isn’t it about time for a change of act and Nadeko heads off in search of Serpent-san’s relic? She has a feeling Tsukihi-chan’s popularity is being steadily depleted... No.

Tsukihi-chan probably doesn’t concern herself at all with how well she’s liked—right, unlike Nadeko.

‘How long have you known?’

‘How long... um, well, from rumors... well, there’s that, but... b-but, before the rumors, rather than rumors, Nadeko’s seen Koyomi Onii-chan walking with girls quite often...’

‘.....’

Don’t go getting seen, bro.

Tsukihi-chan muttered.

The sister’s strong indignation at the brother’s carelessness comes across.

‘But they were different girls each time, so they didn’t seem like they were his girlfriend...’

‘My brother’s way too careless...’

‘Come to mention it, there were times when he was being carried on Karen-san’s shoulders...’

‘More than once!?’

‘S-So it seemed like maybe they were all like little sisters to him...’

‘I think a man with that many girls who are like little sisters to him would be considerably more of a scumbag than even one with lots of girlfriends...’

‘But.’

But.

From amongst them, just one—had been clearly “different”.

There had been someone different.

Not like a younger sister and, of course, not like an older sister either—

‘One who had the look of being his lover, like she was made for him...’

‘...Like she was made for him, yeah.’

Tsukihi-chan registers her agreement at those words.

‘Certainly—she’s a fit for him. That girl. Like there could be no one else for Onii-chan. People might think Onii-chan is the only one for her, but really it’s the other way round, right?’

‘That was last month... Ah, no, it’s November now... So the month before last.’

‘Uh-huh. So after the start of 2nd term... That’s maybe later than I’d thought.’

‘.....’

‘Is this true? You’re not lying to me?’

Tsukihi-chan goggles at Nadeko.

With her eyes open wide, it's pretty disturbing.

She looks intense.

'If you're lying I'll hit you, okay?'

'I-It's no lie...'

'In the lower abdomen.'

'The target's got more specific...'

'Hmm, okay. Well, it's not particularly the point even if you were lying about that anyway—the problem I'm dealing with now is: "How come Nadeko-chan, despite knowing Onii-chan has a girlfriend, would even now, still be in love with him?"'

'Y-You're treating it as a problem...'

Nadeko moves back slightly.

The closer she is, the easier she would be to hit.

But the wall's close behind her, so she shan't be running away...

'What, you're saying there's no problem?'

'W-Well... Nadeko's not exactly...'

It's a high pressure conversation where a fist could come flying at a wrong answer... Just how did it end up like this?

The fact that her sneaking out of home had been discovered by her parents was part of it, but she also felt the major cause had been Serpent-san's false reading...

As ever, Serpent-san simply stayed bound around Nadeko's right hand. By now she wants to start calling him merely Scrunchie-san instead.

'Nadeko's not exactly aiming to steal him away... Or come between them... It's not like Nadeko's hoping that Koyomi Onii-chan would break up from his girlfriend... Um, it's true that... Nadeko would like to go out with Koyomi Onii-chan... But if he has a girlfriend, then rather than trying to be a nuisance... it would be nice to just be with him... Just being able to love him is enough...'

'That's what I'm saying is a problem!'

She got hit—well, not actually hit.

Just, at that loud voice, she felt like she had been thumped on the head—she shrunk inward.

A snake would have curled up its tail.

'You've got a blatant crush on him, but then you're saying it's not like you want to go out with him... Or saying it's not like you want to be his girlfriend. You're not making any real sense.'

'.....'

'Saying it's fine just being with him or it's enough just to love him—that sort of thing may sound good, like it's forbearing, or modest, or something, but seriously, you don't think it actually makes sense, do you?'

Tsukihime was making no effort to conceal the edge in her tone. She really does look to be angry at Nadeko—but.

Nadeko couldn't understand.

Just what was she angry about?

And—for the sake of Nadeko, at that?

‘Is what you’re saying, that to you, Onii-chan’s like an idol out of the cathode ray tube? Or like he’s a hero out of a manga? He’s no more than just some existence you aspire to—is that what you’re saying?’

‘.....’

The term cathode ray tube is getting close to anachronism...

‘Though you say you have sexual... correction, feelings for him as a member of the opposite sex, actually that’s as far as it goes?’

‘J-Just supposing, though, that that’s the case... well, you see...’

Nadeko says, hemming and hawing, to Tsukihi-chan.

And as ever, keeping her eyes cast downward.

This is the most she could manage as a rebuttal.

‘With feelings for, like, idols and heroes, right? Saying “that’s as far as it goes?” well, those aren’t necessarily “weak” feelings, are they...? T-To Nadeko, Koyomi Onii-chan is like...’

‘No, forget that.’

Tsukihi-chan cuts Nadeko short.

‘You’re being kind of all *woolly*, is what I’m saying—at the same time as having loved him since as long ago as the 2nd year of elementary school, you’re being weirdly acquiescent in what you’re saying. But then again, you’re inviting him to your house, dressing provocatively, sleeping in his bed, being quite proactive, pretending you hadn’t seen he’s got a girlfriend—so it’s not like you’ve given up, and you seem happy about Onii-chan fretting over you.’

‘H-Happy...?’

She was. Delighted.

‘If I can be frank about how this all seems to me, well, let’s see...’

Says Tsukihi-chan.

If she can be frank, she had said—well, actually Nadeko would rather she wouldn’t be, if possible, but it didn’t seem like Tsukihi-chan would “surmise” Nadeko’s view on that.

Tsukihi-chan goes ahead.

Nadeko-chan, she begins.

‘It’s like you’re using an unachievable romance because it’s safe, I suppose.’

‘.....’

‘Like, if you’re already in love with someone, you can go on never falling in love with anyone else.’

Oh yeah, didn’t Hanekawa-san say something like, ideals that are too high can spoil a person—Tsukihi-chan muttered, as if it were someone else’s issue.

No, in fact it is someone else's. It's Nadeko's.

'In that sense, I think the analogy of an idol out of the cathode ray tube or a hero out of a manga is pretty clear, even if I do say so myself, right? I'm not saying this just to be mean, y'know—after all, I get that with a romance with those sorts of unreachable people or fictitious characters you don't risk getting hurt.'

Like that 2D moe thing?

Tsukihi-chan says.

'Being in love with someone who can't ever dump you is nice and easy, right?'

'...Y-You might never get dumped... but idols get married and heroes get together with heroines... don't they?'

'Right, they do.'

It was the best objection Nadeko could muster and Tsukihi-chan simply granted it. As though to say that that part being refuted does nothing to hurt her argument.

No, in fact that was probably true.

Like saying: "Why didn't Cinderella's glass slipper disappear when the magic ended?" what Nadeko had said just now was only silly nitpicking.

After all.

All that actually does—is bring up the fact that Koyomi Onii-chan did get a girlfriend.

'Ts-Tsukihi-chan... Um, well, that's not how it is. Nadeko really has no intention like that...'

'Oh? But are you sure? I mean, thanks to your crush on Onii-chan, haven't things been pretty easy for you so far?'

'Wh-What do you mean...?'

'Look, c'mon. When, like, if some boy asked you out, wasn't it easier to turn him down, yeah? With a "There's someone else I like."'

'.....'

For the sake of bringing this excruciating conversation to an end, she might have said: "It's not like that"—she might have told that lie, except she wasn't able to do it.

That fact was, in the 1st term Nadeko had used just such a reason to turn down that boy from the baseball club—and that wasn't the first time.

And as someone the other person couldn't object to, Koyomi Onii-chan was frankly rather useful—after all, he was well known as the "dependable brother" of "those" sisters, Karen-chan and Tsukihi-chan.

'Oh, it's not something to let bother you. Back when I was in elementary school, when a boy asked me out I'd tell him: "I love my brother," to turn him down.'

'...Th-That might have dissuaded them in a different sense...'

By the way, Tsukihi-chan was supposed to have someone she was dating—an older boy, as Nadeko recalls.

Mizudori-kun or Rousokuzawa-kun...

Which was which?

And Nadeko wonders.

That boyfriend—does Tsukihi-chan love him more than Koyomi Onii-chan?

‘It’s not something to let bother you, but...’

Tsukihi-chan continues, completely ignoring Nadeko’s quip (feels cold).

‘But with that kinda thing, I wonder. Maybe you can’t blame people if they think you’re putting on a cutesy act.’

She says.

‘...A-Act?’

‘Maybe not. I suppose Nadeko-chan’s doing it naturally, so it’s not an act, huh. Right, no—Nadeko-chan *is cute*.’

‘.....’

‘But if you say you’re in love with a guy you call “Onii-chan” then it’s not actually very convincing at all.’

That’s what I was told by Rousokuzawa-kun.

Tsukihi-chan adds.

So it was Rousokuzawa-kun.

‘—And that was why I started going out with him.’

‘Th-That’s the reason?’

‘That’s the reason. That was enough for me—but for you, Nadeko-chan, do you have enough of a reason to be attracted to Onii-chan? You don’t need a reason to be attracted to a person—sounds reasonable on first hearing, but it’s not actually like that, is it? I said before—any reason is fine, but you need a reason, even if it’s one you find after the fact. Like, even if it’s not a reason that anyone else would be convinced by other than yourself.’

‘...Wh-Wha...’

What time must it be now?

From what she could tell through the curtains, it feels like it must be getting pretty light outside—but she doesn’t know the real time.

If she goes back home now, takes a shower, eats breakfast and heads to school—would she get there on time?

It was such matters that occupied her mind.

‘N-N-Nadeko...’

‘That.’

‘Eh?’

‘Nadeko-chan, why do you say “Nadeko” when talking about yourself? You’re not a little kid or, for

that matter, a manga character—'

Having this new criticism come from an unexpected direction, Nadeko feels like she's been outflanked.

Th-The way she refers to herself? Are they going to make conversation of that now?

‘—Is that another of Nadeko-chan’s “cute” points?’

‘Ah, um... N-Nadeko doesn’t really mean it like...’

‘Or is it maybe that your emotional growth hasn’t moved on from when you were in the 2nd year of elementary school? Or perhaps without making it complicated by thinking like that, we can just leave it at you being a girl who’s in love with being in love.’

‘Th... That could well be part of it too... B-But, Tsukihi-chan, Nadeko just doesn’t want to be a nuisance to Koyomi Onii-chan...’

‘Nuisance?’

‘Y-Yep... L-Like Nadeko said earlier too... Not being a nuisance at least...’

Nadeko nods and continues.

At this rate, if she just clams up, it didn’t seem like Tsukihi-chan would ever let Nadeko go—she could end up stuck in Koyomi Onii-chan’s room for the rest of her life.

Though that didn’t sound all that bad either.

‘It was certainly a shock to learn that Koyomi Onii-chan had a girlfriend... A night spent crying even... But that doesn’t mean that Nadeko’s feelings can change at that, like the flick of a switch.’

They drag on.

They can’t just be forgotten.

‘From where Tsukihi-chan’s looking, it may seem like what Nadeko’s doing is playing at romance... Or it may seem like a love that’s too single-minded... But to Nadeko this is what’s normal. It’s not something to feel—guilty about.’

‘.....’

‘But becoming a nuisance to Koyomi Onii-chan... isn’t what Nadeko wants. I-Is that so bad? Is there something wrong with just loving him?’

She doesn’t want to be a nuisance.

And just as much as that—*she didn’t want to be brokenhearted*.

Nadeko didn’t want to lose this love.

‘...Of course, it’s obvious that Nadeko couldn’t really get in the way... Against that woman—it’s not like Nadeko could win.’

‘To boys—no, even girls too...’

Tsukihi-chan says, getting down from the bed.

Thinking that movement might have meant she had got through to Tsukihi-chan, Nadeko felt a sigh of relief.

But no.

Tsukihi-chan, facing Koyomi Onii-chan's desk, reached toward a stationery holder on it.  
'Nadeko-chan's stance on that, is bound to seem "cute", I guess. Feebly, pluckily, adorable.'

'.....'

'Of course, I think so too.'

But, well, I am Onii-chan's little sister, y'know—Tsukihi-chan said, and from the stationery holder she picked up a certain item of stationery.

Well, among items of stationery, *that* is a rather commonplace implement, so not particularly something to make a big deal of.

'And—the person who introduced Nadeko-chan to Onii-chan was me, after all. While small, there is some responsibility in that, and when I think of it—I guess I can't just leave things alone. If I'm honest, I feel I do want to leave it alone though... I'm not saying I just want to leave things be, I mean I want to stay well out of it...'

'.....'

'There are people who buy lottery tickets, right? Even though they've got no real chance of winning. If you ask them why they buy them, they say: "I'm buying a dream"... Well, every time I hear that, I find myself thinking—"Buy some reality!"'

'.....'

Serpent-san comparing his dowsing with playing a lottery sprang to mind, unbidden.

'Saying "dream a little" means face reality, I think—personally. If Nadeko-chan had really intended to ask Onii-chan out—if you'd intended to fight with that woman, I thought I wouldn't have minded supporting you. I thought I might have wanted to support you. At the very least, I thought I'd quietly watch out for you. Until now, that's how I'd thought for a long time... But forget it.'

Enough's enough.

I'm going to put an end to this.

Tsukihi-chan said, turning around.

The stationery item in her right hand was, sure enough.

Sure enough—just a pair of scissors.

'Snip!'

That sound—felt to Nadeko like she heard it from somewhere far away.

However, it was by no means distant.

It was all too close.

If Tsukihi-chan had happened to be even slightly off in her aim, Nadeko would have lost the sight in both her eyes—it was that close.

'Eh...?'

Fluttering, fluttering.

Narrowly spared, Nadeko's eyes... caught sight of something, bit by bit, falling past them.

Something, or rather.

With no doubt, with no muddling it for some other thing—with no dressing it up in euphemism, it was Nadeko's fringe.

With a snip.

Tsukihi-chan had swung the scissors—and cleaved Nadeko's fringe in twain.

'.....'

Indeed.

Stupefaction isn't going to lead anywhere.

Very well, then Nadeko will commence a scream.

Your attention, please.

Ready, set.

'Gyaaah!'

## 017

It is now an hour since Nadeko had screamed like a demon lord letting out his death howl after being stabbed through the heart with a legendary sword.

She's not too clear on what happened after that.

It's a blur. All very hazy.

Quite how Nadeko came to be staggering toward school is a puzzle wrapped in an enigma she can do little to unravel. Why she is heading—taking her steps, left then right, right then left, like she's half-asleep, half-sleeping, with her vision swimming—for her school is a mystery.

Why she is still living now.

Is a mystery.

Her memories are faint, but if she does attempt to run through them, using them as a means of retreating from reality, then—ah, yes—first she has a flashback of Koyomi Onii-chan, having heard Nadeko's scream, come running into the room, and sending Tsukihi-chan flying.

With an 'Uwah...' it comes back to her.

From practically point blank range she had witnessed a girl getting punched... That shocking image was enough to make Nadeko lose any will to reproach Tsukihi-chan for her "atrocious" against Nadeko, so in that sense it could be seen as marvelously judicious sentencing passed by Koyomi Onii-chan, surpassing even the judgment of Ooka the Wise.

'Sengokuuuuuuu! Keep it together! You're going to be okay—it's just your fringe that's gone!'

Just her fringe had gone?

No, no, no.

Isn't that everything?

Take her fringe from Nadeko and what would be left?

'It's seriously weird, but don't worry about it!'

It's seriously weird, but...

Saying that can hardly be considered reassurance... Isn't that just stating reality...?

'Karen-chan! Come quick! Take Sengoku somewhere safe! I've got something I need to say to my smaller sister! Well, no, there's nothing to talk about anymore, but I want to be alone with her for a while!'

'Fu-fufufu.'

Tsukihi-chan, with Koyomi Onii-chan astride her, laughed creepily.

With the unpleasant realness of blood coming from her mouth, she laughs.

This is no super deformed scene.

'O-Onii-chan, wanting to be alone together? How bold.'

'Oh, you bet I'm going to be bold! What I'm about to do to your body, we won't be able show to minors or the citizens of Tokyo Metropolis! Prepare yourself!'

'B-Be tender with me...'

'Right, where exactly is tender!?"

A bloodcurdling fight between brother and sister is unfolding.

Well, no, since Nadeko was removed bodily from the room by Karen-san—who had arrived in the room as though magically summoned up by Koyomi Onii-chan's call—what happened next between them, whether it was bloodcurdling or something even worse, is beyond her knowledge...

'Wh-What's Tsukihi-chan doing... Even I can't cover for her when she goes this far...'

Says Karen-san, trembling and strangely sweating (not of invigoration) in a way quite unlike her, while she takes Nadeko to the washroom on the first floor.

And then:

'Errr... I'm sure these are the ones Tsukihi-chan normally uses...'

She says, taking a pair of scissors from a shelf.

Rather than the paper cutting scissors that Tsukihi-chan had used, these were barber's scissors with a notched blade, for use on hair.

'We can't just leave it like it is, so for now I'm going to even it up to look more natural... That okay?'

Karen-san is treating Nadeko with care.

The same Karen-san who is supposed to be "rough" and "tactless"...

'What state is Nadeko in...?'

Said Nadeko, and cast her bleary gaze toward the washroom mirror.

The person in that mirror was—who?

Was what she wanted to ask—of the fringeless girl there, with her eyebrows and forehead laid bare. So that's how it had been.

‘...No way. No way. No way. No way. No way. No way. No way...’

Mutters Nadeko as she heads for school—using the palms of both her left and right hands to hide her face while she walks.

She really wants to pull a hat right down over her head... If only it were allowed she would even wear a bowler hat, but whatever hat she wore, at school she would have to take it off...

Really she would much rather take the day off school...

She doesn't want to go to school with her hair like this...

Actually, thanks to Karen-san apparently having a surprising knack for styling, it's been made into something somewhat fit to be seen... Even so, there could be no disguising the imbalance of the front with the sides and back.

Unless she has it restyled very short, there's no way to make it balanced.

Even hiding her face as she walks like this, she can't really conceal it—with Nadeko's small hands, even if she covers her face, her fingers won't reach her forehead.

She feels like everyone must be laughing at Nadeko.

‘No way. No way. No way...’

‘Nah, nah, running from reality ain't gonna get ya anywhere, Nadeko-chan—aaan?’

From in front of Nadeko's face, no longer guarded by her fringe, came a voice—no, it couldn't really have come from in front, in fact it's from just next to her face.

Saying it came from the wrist of her right hand now covering the right half of her face would probably make it easy to guess.

Yes.

At long last, it was Serpent-san.

‘.....’

‘Hm? What's with that? Why no response, Nadeko-chan?’

‘Sh-Shut up...’

Says Nadeko.

It's a rude outburst, rare for Nadeko.

It's a crude expression that shouldn't be used even were she not speaking to a god, but naturally she wasn't in the frame of mind to consider that far.

‘Serpent-san... you're horrible.’

‘Horrible? Why?’

‘Y-You didn't help Nadeko.’

‘Oi, oi, be reasonable—what could I have done? If anything, didn’t I keep my promise to ya and kept schtum all the way through, right? Why, ya ought to be thanking me, not telling me off—aaan?’

‘.....’

It’s exactly as he says, logically.

But it’s not logic she wants to talk about.

It’s how she feels.

‘And even if that weren’t so, it ain’t like I’ve got a reason to help Nadeko-chan. Saying I didn’t save ya, ain’t that a pretty pushy and entitled way of talking, aaan?’

‘...That’s true, but... Oooh.’

As she says this, she lowers her right hand.

Now that Serpent-san has started talking, acting as an oddity instead of a scrunchie, she doesn’t want to be speaking with him too close (putting it in a “romantic” way, they had been in a position almost kissing each other).

Now with just one of her small hands, she couldn’t possibly hide her face, so she gives up entirely and lowers her left hand too.

Oh well.

It wasn’t like she would have been able to keep up her “peekaboo” like that for long anyway...

It won’t change that here she is.

A girl with no fringe.

‘.....’

Uhhh, she’s not sure about this. It feels like she’s walking around naked.

Being unable to hide her face—whether she covers it, keeps it down or whatever she might try—somehow it feels like she’s cast her off her decency...

Might this be how Kanbaru-san feels all the time?

If so, then she really is something. All respect to her.

Not really. It’s not like even Kanbaru-san makes a regular thing of walking around buck naked.

‘Nah, what’s with that about casting off decency? This is what’s normal.’

Serpent-san talks as though he had read her mind.

She doesn’t have the energy to argue.

Even so.

‘You’re horrible... Serpent-san—so horrible...’

She mumbles, as though to herself, but that she keeps saying it, in a way that will obviously be heard, as if protesting, is probably the most that Nadeko can muster as opposition.

It wasn’t that she was doing it consciously, rather it should probably be said to be something close to gibbering.

‘Serpent-san’s a bully.’

‘Bullying...? What’re ya having a go at me for? If yer lashing out, yer well wide of the mark, aaaa? Nadeko-chan’s fringe, as long as a snake, weren’t cut off by me, but by Tsukihi-chan, weren’t it?’

‘Oooooh...’

It was all as he says.

Frankly, however, it’s hard to direct anger at Tsukihi-chan... Even without taking into account the punishment she had already been given.

‘Wh-Why... But why would Tsukihi-chan do this to Nadeko...?’

‘I don’t reckon ya need to be asking why.’

Serpent-san seemed amused.

While he may be merged with Nadeko, there seems to be no link between their emotions whatsoever. Quite the difference from how it is with Shinobu-san and Black Hanekawa-san.

But in this situation, just what could he find amusing?

‘I mean, I reckon Nadeko-chan must’ve touched that girl’s reverse scale.’

‘R-Reverse scale...? Wh-what’s that? Some sort of new moe character type?’

‘Nah, nah, it ain’t some neologism or nickname. Right, so Nadeko-chan don’t know about the reverse scale. Han Feizi, a Chinese philosopher, wrote about how dragons had inverted scales under their necks and would become enraged with and kill anyone who touched them. To meself, with the scales all over my body standing on end like this, it’s a real natural word. Well, basically, I mean Nadeko-chan made Tsukihi-chan angry.’

‘.....’

It hadn’t looked that way to Nadeko though—she didn’t think it was how Tsukihi-chan, fitful and hysterical, gets angry—despite that, would Tsukihi-chan be said to have been angry?

Was it as the result of anger toward Nadeko.

That those scissors had flashed?

.....

No, but however angry someone was, they wouldn’t cut a girl’s hair.

‘She really is scary... That Tsukihi-chan...’

‘Really? Way I see it, it’s Nadeko-chan who’s the real scary one, ya know.’

‘? Why would that be...?’

‘Hearing that conversation ya had, that’s what I thought—Sha! Sha! Rather than the way Nadeko-chan feels, it’s Tsukihi-chan who I can understand all the more.’

*And we’re not all that distant as existences*—Serpent-san said, making no sense.

‘...Though, she’s a fair bit more macabre than even me.’

‘Wh... What’re you talking about?’

‘Ain’t saying anything. I ain’t saying a thing—nothing at all. If Nadeko-chan don’t know what I’m talking about, ya don’t need to know. Anyway, never mind that, Nadeko-chan, ya ain’t gone and

forgotten, right? Nadeko-chan, yer gonna restart yer work of finding my relic this evening, ya know?’

‘.....’

‘Oh? Ya ain’t seriously forgotten, have ya?’

‘No... But it’s just, with this hairstyle, going walking around outside is a bit... Having to go to school can’t be helped, but...’

And Serpent-san didn’t help when Nadeko needed it, she muttered, but it seems that Serpent-sar didn’t hear that bit.

Her voice must have been too low. Maybe she ought to be a bit more insistent.

‘Um, Serpent-san. This is a proposition.’

‘What’s that? A proposition?’

‘N-Nadeko thinks it’s a proposition with mutual “merit”, so will you listen?’

‘Course I’ll listen. Me and Nadeko-chan are trusty partners.’

How is it that he can say such a thing?

It’s not “speaking with a forked tongue”, but, well, his is a snake’s tongue after all.

Nadeko is going to say it. This is her mutually beneficial proposition.

‘Until Nadeko’s hair grows longer, how about a halt to the search for the relic?’

‘...In what part of that proposition, is there any merit to me!?’

‘Hiy!’

Shouted at by Serpent-san, Nadeko flinches—ah, well, it’s no surprise.

‘P-Perhaps the satisfaction of doing as Nadeko asked?’

‘Who died to make you king?’

The god retorted.

As expected, it’s a strong rejection.

Nadeko heaves a big sigh.

‘In that case... at night, Nadeko can just wear a hat... And put on sunglasses and wear a mask...’

‘A robber, are ya?’

Exasperated, ‘Tsk, ain’t there nothing to be done with ya, Nadeko-chan?’ Serpent-san said.

‘Yer hairstyle ain’t gonna matter.’

‘F-For girls it’s a huge problem.’

‘It’s fine, I tell ya. It still looks cute.’

‘!’

She doesn’t know what Serpent-san had been thinking when he said that—perhaps he had just been trying to put her mind at ease, or maybe it didn’t even mean so much as that and had simply been for the sake of something to say.

Only, that word.

Was like a thorn to Nadeko now.

Like she had been pierced by a fang.

‘It...’

‘It?’

‘It’s not cute at all!’

She yelled.

On the road to the school—now that she realizes, she’s already close to the school, where there’s other students from her year, and the years above and below, and even teachers around—and Nadeko had just yelled out loud here.

Immediately shutting her mouth and then covering that mouth with her free left hand, she hurries on from there—she rushes through the school gates and makes a beeline for the school building.

‘Oi, oi, what’re ya doing, Nadeko-chan—by running, acting odd like this, yer just gonna make yourself more suspicious, ain’t ya? When yer recovering from a mistake like that, is when ya gotta act smooth.’

‘Ooooh...’

Not because of being told that by Serpent-san, but upon reaching the shoe rack, Nadeko did come to a standstill at last.

Who would have thought losing her fringe could be so discomforting?

It wasn’t a problem of whether it was cute or not...

The unease is too much.

With a glance, her eyes go to the full length mirror set diagonally opposite the shoe rack—though what’s there is a thing she had been given glimpses of already while on her way here, “inside” unexpected mirrors or panes of glass that had been at an angle to present it.

It’s an unfamiliar girl there. A new character. She must be an anime original character, or perhaps for the game version.

Well, not that there is a game version though.

‘...See, she really isn’t cute.’

‘Sha! Sha! Ah, but if so, ain’t that in fact, what Nadeko-chan wanted? Weren’t ya saying ya hated being favored for being cute?’

‘Hated isn’t quite...’

She can’t argue back properly.

‘It’s all right, ain’t it? It’s just hair. Just leave it and it’ll grow back eventually.’

‘It won’t grow back... Nadeko’s sure to be like this forever.’

‘Like hell ya will... What’s with that? Rather than negative, yer just being pig-headed. It’ll be fine if ya quit talking like that, tend to it properly and put some effort into making it grow back faster, right?’

‘R-Right... In that case, Nadeko will do her best and become erotic!’

‘That’s a hell of a declaration…’

‘And read loads of smutty books!’

Since Kanbaru-san says it’s because she’s “erotic” that her hair grows fast...

Though, well, she does also rather strongly suspect it’s not actually quite a matter of that.

Anyway, to begin with, that sort of thing was not at all what she wanted to say—but just how is Nadeko supposed to be able to describe these feelings of hers to Serpent-san?

And they’re inside the school now—she ought not to continue her talk with Serpent-san.

They could talk again at night.

Despite what she had said, she couldn’t really put off looking for his relic... If they waited for Nadeko’s hair to grow back, Serpent-san’s energy might be exhausted.

‘I suppose...’

‘Eh?’

‘I suppose, if ya really are so bothered about yer hair—I wouldn’t mind fixing it for ya, aaan?’

‘.....’

At Serpent-san’s own, sudden “proposition”, Nadeko is taken aback.

Eh?

‘Y-You can... do that?’

She asks back, her voice lowered.

What she’s currently engaged in, is the changing of her shoes. Trying to play it cool—only, if she claimed her fingers weren’t trembling when she was taking out her indoor shoes, that may well be a lie.

‘I’m a god, ain’t I? Hearing people’s wishes is what I do. I weren’t intending to offer to make a bargain, but if ya get my relic back for me, I can at least grant yer wish for yer hair to grow.’

‘.....’

‘Knock it off with that gleam in yer eyes, Nadeko-chan. Don’t expect too much—to be precise, it’ll only make the speed yer hair grows faster. It ain’t like it’ll go back to how it were.’

It ain’t like it’ll go back to how it were—Serpent-san repeated, as though this were somehow a salient point.

However, whatever that point was, it didn’t matter to Nadeko. The important thing was simply that Nadeko’s hair would grow.

‘D-Do you mean... right now?’

‘Listen to people, will ya? And to snakes. I said it’d be if ya get my relic back, didn’t I? The way I am now, I ain’t got that kind of power. Ain’t that obvious?’

‘...Oh.’

That’s a bit of a letdown.

So it seems that, for Nadeko to get her fringe back, she will, after all, have to carry on going

“loitering” around the town at night, with her current unrecognizable original character visual.

No, well, even so, at least there’s some hope now—or is there really?

He might just be lying to cheer her up.

Or even if he isn’t, even if she goes and optimistically takes his word for it, where the relic is, is still as unknown as ever and they’ve found out that Serpent-san’s dowsing ability can have false readings, so there’s severe uncertainty for what lies ahead.

She has a feeling the situation hasn’t improved one bit.

For all she knows, it could even turn out that before Serpent-san’s relic has been found, her hair will have grown back normally...

And really, Serpent-san’s “time limit”—how long is that going to be?

‘Nah, nah, Nadeko-chan—all that said, that ain’t how it is.’

‘Huh?’

That isn’t how it is? What isn’t it?

‘Wh... What do you mean?’

‘I’m saying we might even be able to find it as early as this evening—my relic, I mean. Turning disaster into good fortune ya could say, or that fortune good and bad is intertwined—well, maybe that’s a funny thing for me, as a serpent, to be saying, but ya might say that the false reading yesterday worked out for the better.’

Says Serpent-san—with a smirk. Well, no, he can’t really smirk, but metaphorically.

‘It may have been a disaster for Nadeko-chan, but ya could say it were a slice of luck for me. The sacrifice of Nadeko-chan’s fringe weren’t to no purpose.’

‘.....’

Please don’t go making Nadeko’s fringe into a sacrifice.

It’s no consolation to her.

‘But what are you talking about...?’

‘Sha! Sha! Sha! To Nadeko-chan it’s probably only a bright spot amidst misfortune though—at least, I doubt yer gonna think it a saving grace.’

‘.....’

She couldn’t understand what the subtle differences in meanings were in the phrases he was coming out with.

Doesn’t it all mean the same thing?

‘What I’m saying is, thanks to Koyomi Onii-chan taking Nadeko-chan in, I’ve got an idea of where my relic is—naturally it ain’t a certainty though.’

‘...R-Really? Then...’

Then that would mean the search operation for the relic could end as soon as even today—if that’s true, then certainly it really could be a “bright spot amidst misfortune” for Nadeko.

That it was worth sacrificing her hair for—wasn’t something she thought for even a minute, but she did feel it would a go a bit toward compensating for it.

Though, well, she does seem to remember thinking something similar last night, so she can’t go about celebrating just yet...

‘S-So, Serpent-san, what’s your idea...?’

‘Telling ya that, can wait until it’s night—we can’t go looking until night anyway and it’s a place that may come as a bit of a surprise for Nadeko-chan, ya see. Ain’t good if that distracted ya from yer lessons.’

‘.....’

If the location of the relic were firm, Nadeko wouldn’t mind skipping a day of school... Though, well, this arrangement was one she herself had insisted upon, so she’s hesitant to revoke it.

And there’s also that she can’t pretend she doesn’t feel that she would rather not take her classes with her hair like this... And precisely because she has that feeling, it would be like she were taking advantage and therefore doing something to feel guilty about.

‘Somewhere surprising to Nadeko...? Meaning, somewhere that Nadeko knows?’

‘That’d be right.’

‘...Was it that, during Nadeko’s... conversation with Koyomi Onii-chan yesterday... or with Shinobu-san or Tsukihi-chan, there was something like a hint—that made it come to you, Serpent-san?’

It must have been something like that.

But Serpent-san, neither giving a clear confirmation nor a denial, said instead:

‘Well, I suppose it were along those lines—it ain’t that it ain’t like that.’

A rather ambivalent reply.

It’s a way of putting it that prompts unease.

‘...Um, Serpent-san... If you call Nadeko your partner, then it would be nice if you would tell Nadeko things properly, without “concealment”... It’s Nadeko who has to actually do the searching...’

‘Nah, nah, don’t worry. It ain’t that I’m holding back on ya—and I ain’t plotting anything. All I’m doing is choosing what I think is the best way of doing things, Nadeko-chan.’

‘...But...’

‘Anyway, besides, ain’t Nadeko-chan got other things ya ought to be trying to deal with, aaan?’

‘.....’

Well, that is true.

Such as why Tsukihi-chan had cut Nadeko’s hair all of a sudden—though according to Serpent-san it was apparently because Nadeko had touched Tsukihi-chan’s “reverse scale”...

Tsukihi-chan can get angry for someone else’s sake.

That may be something passed on to her from Koyomi Onii-chan’s will to act for the sake of

others... Only, Nadeko doesn't really see why that "anger" would have gone on to produce this result.

She thinks it may be something she would only be able hear from Tsukihi-chan herself...

But she also suspects it's something that would be meaningless if she has to ask...

And when she thinks of how much of a penalty Koyomi Onii-chan inflicted upon Tsukihi-chan, the Araragi residence isn't somewhere she feels like calling in on.

She would rather refrain from phoning either.

'...True. Better think about it... Normally you might think that, by cutting Nadeko's hair, she was forcefully construing that as "failed romance", but it couldn't be something simplistic like that.'

'Nah, come on, ain't that the right answer? Don't ya get it really, Nadeko-chan? I reckon yer on the money—but, well, if ya reckon that's simplistic, Nadeko-chan ought to think about it at length. And not just why yer hair got cut, but also why yer stuck on talking about yerself using yer own name.'

Serpent-san said testily.

Nadeko was shaken by those words.

At length—as in, for a long time?

A long time?

'Oh but... thinking over things for a long time... doing such a *tiresome thing*'

Nadeko had begun to blurt out those words, but by an 'Ah. I'll shut up,' she was interrupted midway.

Without even time to wonder what had happened, from behind her came:

'Sengoku.'

And a hand was placed on her shoulder.

It was over her clothes, so the repulsion wasn't all that strong, but she was still taken by surprise.

She turns around with a start to find that it is her homeroom teacher Sasayabu-sensei there.

Engrossed in conversation, it had nearly slipped her mind, but right now she was inside the school building—and once again.

Once again, anxiety takes hold of her.

Thanks to Serpent-san noticing first and hushing up, Sasayabu-sensei should not have heard their conversation—but nevertheless, she tries to gauge the look of Sasayabu-sensei.

With an 'Uhm, hmm?' Sasayabu-sensei was wearing a plainly bemused expression.

She thought perhaps he may have caught onto something, but it wasn't that—what Sasayabu-sensei was surprised at was nothing to do with Serpent-san, but Nadeko's hairstyle.

He must not have been able to tell from looking at her from behind, that Nadeko, in contrast to the Nadeko of as recently as yesterday, had no fringe—even Sasayabu-sensei would be startled.

'W-Wrong person... Sorry.'

'Ah, no, this is Sengoku, sir.'

Sasayabu-sensei had hurriedly made to move away, but Nadeko calls him back—if she had had the time to think about it, there hadn't been any need to stop him, but it was reflexive.

‘This is Sengoku Nadeko, sir.’

‘...Sengoku, this was your true form...?’

Sasayabu-sensei’s rather tactless remark.

Well, Nadeko herself thinks much the same thing though.

However, she doesn’t want people thinking this is the real Nadeko... She has no intention of having this weird hairstyle, with just the fringe short, be her true form...

Sasayabu-sensei, with a cough, deliberately clears his throat.

‘...Was it bullying?’

He says.

...Is that how it looks?

Could this innovative hairstyle appear to third parties to be the result of unwarranted persecution by a peer?—Well, ultimately, she supposes it could.

They may go to different schools, but Tsukihi-chan was indeed one of the girls in Nadeko’s peer group.

‘.....’

Nadeko silently shook her head.

She had a sense that if she had spoken out loud to deny that she was being bullied, then it would rather have had the opposite of the intended effect.

That call appears to have been the right one.

‘I see.’

Sasayabu-sensei seemed to accept it.

However, while on the one hand looking relieved, Sasayabu-sensei also appeared just slightly disappointed—Nadeko can understand the feeling.

If a large, clear-cut problem such as bullying were to occur, he would be able to tackle it as a teacher—at the very least, it would have represented some change from the current state within the class.

He is a pro. If there’s a problem, he can deal with it. However. While “Do not fight” is something he can obligate.

“Get on with each other” is not.

And therefore, the feeling that even a turn for the worse might at this juncture be taken to be for the best, was one that she could, on a logical basis, understand.

...Well, even so, she would certainly not want to hear that “it would have been better if Sengoku were being bullied,” for the sake of that.

Have mercy, please.

‘By the way, Sengoku, about that thing Sensei asked of you, how’s that going? Has there been any progress since?’

Sasayabu-sensei said, switching gears.

Well, he may have been intending it to be a switch, but to Nadeko listening to him, she didn't feel that it was all that much of one—never mind.

It would seem that this was the matter for which he had come and spoken to Nadeko—apparently he had indeed not heard her conversation with Serpent-san, which was a relief for Nadeko.

While admonishing herself that, though she may feel terribly drained emotionally—not just fatigued but almost dead on her feet—she ought to pull herself together and be more careful, at the same time a feeling of disgust toward Sasayabu-sensei came over Nadeko.

She knew it was really not a proper feeling to have toward an adult, and her homeroom teacher at that, but she couldn't hold it back.

After all, it's the day after yesterday.

Since the beginning of the 2nd term, this trouble—this absence of trouble, had dragged on with no sign of any change, practically frozen—how could he expect it to have changed today from yesterday?

Looked at unkindly, from a crafty perspective, one might almost suspect Sasayabu-sensei of making routine work of this—that is: “Upon seeing Sengoku Nadeko, regardless of time or place, check up or it,” it might be.

By doing that, he might claim to be performing his duties as a homeroom teacher—giving himself an excuse or an alibi...

An unpleasant perspective, perhaps.

But it's not like Nadeko is a kid with a particularly nice personality, so she has these kinds of thoughts.

Going further.

Regardless of what Sasayabu-sensei himself may have in mind—what Nadeko finds herself thinking is that if it were Nadeko in his place, she's sure it's what she would do.

‘.....’

Well, Nadeko was thinking all sorts of things inside her head, but that didn't mean she would say them to his face.

Of course she wouldn't. Just like always, Nadeko simply stares at the floor with her head down and goes silent—she'll just wait like this for Sasayabu-sensei to get fed up and go away.

Whatever Sasayabu-sensei's plans were—irrespective of whether it's the day after yesterday or not—Nadeko wasn't doing anything, so of course there wasn't going to be any progress.

She'll be in standby mode.

‘.....?’

However, things did not proceed today “just like always”—Sasayabu-sensei appeared to be waiting strangely perseveringly for a reply from Nadeko.

Now why would that be?

Had something changed from yesterday—Nadeko puzzled, but she soon hit upon the answer.

What had changed from yesterday.

That would, of course, be Nadeko's hairstyle.

She may stare at the floor and keep her head down, but her face is in plain sight of Sasayabu-sensei—and if he can see her expression, the fact that Nadeko is “*not all that troubled*” will be given away.

What an “affliction” this is.

She hadn't anticipated this.

Without her fringe, Nadeko's gloominess has been reduced...

There's no helping it.

She can't very well go covering her face with her hands because of that... She'll just have to come up with something to say to get out of this.

Now what should she tell him?

Please excuse her, she's currently proactively examining the situation, collating issues, forming a proposal, approaching the different parties and conducting nightly brainstorming sessions—maybe?

No, no, not like that.

She should just stick to a usual excuse.

First off, just like always.

Whether she has her fringe or not, just like she always ever does, she ought to start with “sorry” and then go from there—

‘—Get stuffed!’

Huh.

Did someone say something?

‘Course there ain't no progress—don't go shovin' yer work onto me, aaan!?’

## 018

Rather than being Nadeko's voice, it was that of some gallant boy who had at some point appeared behind Nadeko—or some such thing was what she thought might have happened, but no, it was indeed Nadeko's very own voice.

The air from Nadeko's lungs.

Passing Nadeko's vocal cords.

And coming out from Nadeko's mouth.

Only—there was no volition from Nadeko in that.

‘Gettin' in someone's face with yer how's that thing going, how's that thing going—it ain't gonna go

nowhere! That ain't gonna do no good! Instead of startin' the day by darkenin' the mood, how about ya say "good morning" to yer pupils when ya see them, homeroom teacher?!"

'.....'

Sasayabu-sensei was dumbfounded.

Everyone in the vicinity too—as bystanders they were all looking at Nadeko with the same expression.

If she only could, Nadeko herself would like to wear that same expression—she would like to be there staring as a bystander too, but instead, her face seen reflected in the mirror behind Sasayabu-sensei was one that burned with savage rage.

Her teeth clenched, her shoulders drawn up, her eyes bloodshot—shooting glares at everything around her.

Never mind all that about her hairstyle.

This was a girl she was seeing for the first time—but.

Even so, it was definitely Sengoku Nadeko.

It was definitely—"me".

'Just 'cause someone will silently nod and take it, don't think ya can just say whatever ya like—and then act all disappointed with them, when ya know better than anyone what yer foistin' on them ain't reasonable! Is it yer job to ask the absurd of children!? Did ya seriously reckon that crap an adult can't resolve would be sorted out by a child, aaan!?"

'Se... Sengoku? Wh-What's gotten into you?"

At her bewildered teacher, Nadeko stamps her foot with a crash.

As if to split the hall asunder.

Not just her mouth, nor her expression, but Nadeko's whole body—on its own, against Nadeko's will—is moving.

Against her will?

Is that really the case though?

'Ain't nothin' gotten into me! Anyone'd get pissed off, if they keep gettin' given that crap! Ain't that natural? This is what's normal—aaan!?"

She yells.

Foul-mouthed, in a rough voice, ranting.

More than just at Sasayabu-sensei—at everything around her.

Packed full with resentment and hatred.

Directly—fixing her glare on her target.

She yells.

'Quit pissin' about, public servant! Don't go feelin' satisfied with yer slapdash work! At least look out for the brats properly! Don't go passin' the buck! Think yer respectin' yer students' independence? Humans ain't got no independence! Look out for them and help them!'

‘S-Sengoku...’

Just what is Nadeko saying?

She's talking complete madness. Really, frankly she would like to be stupefied there alongside Sasayabu-sensei.

She would like to take exactly the same reaction as him.

Rather than Nadeko, she's Madderko—except not.

No, it really is Nadeko—and nobody else.

Patently Nadeko.

And Nadeko for all to see.

This is—“me”.

This is “the way I am”.

‘Wh-What's wrong, Sengoku...?’

While still thrown, Sasayabu-sensei tries to talk to Nadeko—and reaches for Nadeko's shoulders, as though to try to calm her—

‘Don't ya dare touch me!’

Nadeko shook his hands off.

There was, of course, no intent from Nadeko—but it was her body that shook them off.

It was Nadeko's arms that had swung.

‘What d'ya think people are—puppets or somethin'? Ha! ...I suppose I ain't nothin' but cute, and whatever I'm told, I'll just take it! But that don't mean that I don't feel nothin'! Don't go assumin' the timid ones are really timid! Even the quiet ones, deep down they're thinkin' all kinds of things! Just 'cause they ain't sayin' nothin', don't mean they ain't got no opinions! How is someone who don't get even that much, meant to teach people anythin'!?’

‘S-Sengoku...’

What a dreadful way to talk.

While it could be worse, this was no way to be speaking to her homeroom teacher—come to that, it was no way to speak to any sort of teacher or in fact any adult whatsoever.

‘Uh, wh-what's the matter, Sengoku-san?’

From a distance away, someone spoke out to her... It was a boy who had been in the same class as her last year.

She had forgotten his name, but she remembered him being a considerate person—he looked like he must have come upon this commotion while happening to pass by, and he for his part too, seemed unable to conceal his confusion.

‘C-Calm down. Just calm down. You seem like you must be tired.’

Now that she looks, the bystanders had become quite the crowd—the sensation she has is of being before an audience of hundreds of thousands.

In reality it would be about twenty people though.

At being cast so many stares, and stares of disbelief at that—Nadeko’s heart could almost break.

Looks for a “pitiable kid”.

You could call them that—but in this case, they might even be worse.

Yes.

They were looks for a “weird kid”.

But she couldn’t escape from those stares of disbelief—Nadeko no longer had her fringe to protect her and what’s more, Nadeko herself was facing forward.

Without keeping her head down, nor staring at the floor—

She was looking straight at them.

‘Calm down? Ain’t this where I got to by keepin’ calm? Tired? Ain’t that clear from lookin’!? Dam right I’m tired! Don’t go statin’ the bleedin’ obvious and feelin’ like ya got somethin’ figured out!’

That boy had only simply been showing some concern for Nadeko and yet she had still bared her fangs at him—this is what it is to be indiscriminate.

But no.

This is not just displaced anger—everything.

Right now, in this school, everything—is the target of Sengoku Nadeko’s anger.

She’s angry.

Nadeko is angry.

‘The whole lot of ya, every last one of ya—aaan!? It’s like yer all just sittin’ on the fence and waitin’ to see which way the wind blows! Don’t just sit there like weathercocks, lookin’ this way and that, spinnin’ round and round and round!’

‘S-Sengoku... It wasn’t anything like that which made Sensei give you that job...’

Sasayabu-sensei said gingerly, like handling something sore... No, like handling something broken, trying to settle Nadeko down—discombobulated, he might be said to be.

Perhaps it could be called a by-the-book way of dealing with a meek, sullen student who has “snapped”... Except.

If she thinks it over, Nadeko rather has an inkling that this was how she had usually been treated.

Like handling something broken. Like clearing away shattered glass.

Around her—a line their words wouldn’t cross.

Whatever she was told—it was distant.

Never reaching Nadeko’s heart, never resonating.

‘It’s just, Sensei trusted your sense of responsibility—’

‘What sense of responsibility!? How bad can ya be at judgin’ people!? At least spot just what a worthless loser Sengoku Nadeko is! Don’t just be fooled by looks—c’mon, that’s right, all I have goin’ for me is bein’ cute!’

Don't go trustin' this loser!

Nadeko shouted.

It was a total rejection—of herself, by herself.

‘...S-Sengoku.’

‘Fine, never mind, I get it—it’ll never get through whatever I say, not to you, not to any of ya!

‘Course not, even shoutin’ all this, givin’ ya a piece of my mind, yer all still gonna just think: “Ah, she’s just temporarily gone a bit loopy”—screw that! I’ve been loopy since way back!’

Aaan!?

She hurls invective—and with that, Nadeko’s feet set off moving.

Toward Sasayabu-sensei—no, not quite.

Sasayabu-sensei braced himself, as if thinking she might raise a hand against him, but Nadeko pushed past his body, heading further on—

‘Wh-Where are you going... Sengoku?’

‘Aaan?’

At Sasayabu-sensei’s bewilderment mixed question, Nadeko answers without so much as turning.

‘Ain’t that obvious? As the class rep I’m gonna have to go and do that work for ya—what ya told me to do, ain’t it!? Rejoice, fool!’

W-Wait just a minute, please!

What are you planning to do, Nadeko?

More than Sasayabu-sensei or anyone else, Nadeko was most bewildered of all, but the Nadeko she could glimpse reflected in mirrors she passed, was only irate and had not a hint of hesitation—in this manner, with great strides, she heads for her own classroom.

For Class 2-2’s classroom.

For that classroom where the class dynamic has collapsed and there are no problems.

Nadeko wills, with all her soul, for her feet and body to halt, but there is no hint whatsoever of them stopping—all she feels is that she has become a puppet on strings.

A puppet.

In that case, who is pulling Nadeko’s strings now? And just what is being controlled? Is it her body or is it her mind, she wonders.

After climbing the stairs and arriving in front of the classroom, the first thing Nadeko does, is peek through the small window in the door to take a look inside the room.

In contrast to the coarseness of her language, it is an oddly cautious act—inside the classroom, nearly all of her classmates were already gathered.

Perhaps she had been verifying that?

However, it was the next thing Nadeko did after that which shocked Nadeko... It’s a bit of a tangle to say, but, well, please try to be understanding. It’s very unfortunate, but right now Nadeko’s not in quite the mental state to be able to explain properly. Nor the physical state—And then Nadeko kicked

the door.

She kicked the door down. Kicked the door down?

‘!!’

To describe what kind of kick it was, it was, as used often by Karen-chan, with hips spread wide open, a bold, fearless rolling sobat—a single strike, with all her mass put behind it, that blew the hinged door inward.

That Nadeko’s body, which was supposed to have close to zero athletic ability, could contain such energy was something she had never contemplated—the catapulted door slammed loudly against the teacher’s desk.

As one, the students in the class give their attention—first to the teacher’s desk and the broken door, and then second to Sengoku Nadeko, striding into the classroom like she owns the place.

In terms of how she felt, Nadeko was ashen-faced, but with her expression one of burning fury, that mismatch also added to her befuddlement.

But, at the same time, she had understood something.

Why it was that, before she entered the room—or more precisely, before she had smashed the door down—Nadeko had taken a peek inside the classroom.

That had been to check before she did that, that there were no pupils near the door—meaning that she had taken care that no one would be hit by fragments of the door.

This fact was no small comfort.

While she may appear to be in a fit of rage, if she was still be able to act on a basis with such calculated composure, then actually she could take it as read that she wasn’t about to do anything too rash.

Thank goodness.

Nadeko had been horribly rude to her homeroom teacher and that boy, but it would seem that she did still have some consideration for her classmates.

As a performance, she would have to say that her entrance was overboard, but surely she wasn’t about to say anything all that terrible to them all.

Nadeko walks briskly up to the teacher’s desk.

And then turns to face the class.

‘Oi, ya plebs!’

Her hopes were misplaced.

No longer on the level of rude, she doesn’t want to categorize what she’s using as words anymore. What kind of a way is that to address anyone?

The eyes of everyone in the class pop.

At first, those eyes were saying: “Who is this?”... But of course, before long they seemed to “fathom” that Nadeko was Nadeko. Well, put it this way, it was only her fringe that had gone after all... Look carefully and you presumably would be able to tell.

And the voice is still Nadeko's.

Regardless of how roughened it is.

'Ya gonna answer me, plebs!?"

Please stop...

Stop... Let Nadeko go...

If only her arms would move the way she wanted, rather than hide her face, in this situation she would probably have her head in her arms—but instead those arms slammed the desk with a bang.

It was with a force such that she felt the desk too might break—naturally enough it didn't, but she had a feeling years of use had been taken off its durability.

Of course no one did answer her back.

They simply gaped.

'Listen up, the lot of ya—*face reality!*'

Unconcerned by this—Nadeko thunders.

Is there any more appropriate word than thunders? Veritably, her anger peals around the room—out of control.

'Holdin' back forever over what's passed, lettin' yer precious youth go to waste—do ya not get how pointless a thing it is yer doin'!? Just 'cause ya can't trust the people around ya—over somethin' as natural as that, don't go gettin' yerselves all cut up! Ain't ya all bein' too delicate, aaan!?"

She's ranting on—while beating the desk over and over.

As if it were her sworn archenemy there.

As if it symbolized everyone there.

She beat the desk—the classroom.

'Are adorable, beautiful and lovely folk the only ones ya can get along with!? Can ya only like people who like you!? If ya can't be with anyone but the saintly, yer gonna be on yer own for life, ain't ya!? If someone ya thought of as a friend turns out to envy ya, does that mean ya ain't gonna be friends no more!? If ya get lied to, is that the end of that!? If they do somethin' ya can't forgive, that's goodbye, is it!? Humans are gonna think all sorts of things, ya know—or are ya all absolute morons who ain't thinkin' anythin'!? If ya don't come to some compromise somewhere, this ain't never gonna end! Are ya fine with a 2nd year in middle school like that!? Ya may all be thinkin' ya just have to lump it until the class changes in April, but I hate to break this to ya, but yer memories will linger! Even when ya go to high school, when ya go to university, when ya become an adult, even when ya go out to get a job, this is gonna come back to ya! Ya ain't gonna be able to forget, about this Class 2-2, where ya couldn't trust anyone! It'll probably become yer strongest memory! Then we gotta rewrite over it—we gotta repaint over it, with the memory that "because of some strange charms we temporarily couldn't trust each other, but we made up," don't we!?"

Still dumbfounded—everyone, little by little, backed away.

In the face of Nadeko's peculiarity, they naturally couldn't get a word out and seemed unable to consciously respond, but still their bodies apparently moved to get some distance of their own

accord.

Well, they would.

Nadeko herself would do the same.

If some girl in the class who barely talked and they didn't really know well, all of a sudden turned up to school one day and said all that nonsense—nonsense?

Was it... all of a sudden?

Somehow she felt like it wasn't.

After all, what she had just said was what Nadeko—ever since she became the class rep—had long been thinking.

Without needing to be told by Sasayabu-sensei.

...Only she hadn't done anything.

Despite being told, she had done nothing.

She hadn't done anything.

And that—was because.

Was because it was a hassle.

And a really *tiresome* thing to do.

'Frankly I'd just about like to tell the lot of ya to drop dead, but even without me needin' bother say it, yer all basically dead anyway—ain't ya seein' that, aaan? Yer damn unbelievable—'specially the way ya screwed yerselves over when ya took advantage of me bein' quiet to push the position of class rep on me! It's times like these, ya need someone to take the initiative and draw the line! It ain't like I can do anythin'!'

It's an absurd defiance she's showing.

Rather leaving herself wide open, you might say.

But it was as she said.

Having Nadeko as a class rep, why, things could only be made to worsen—like Nadeko did.

A girl who would do nothing.

*A girl who wanted to carry on being just a victim.*

'Yeah, certainly yer all the very worst! Two-faced hypocrites! Ya envy close friends, yer quick to grow to hate the people ya like, ya badmouth the people ya hate, then yer suckin' up to them, paperin' over things with fake smiles—yer all treacherous scum! Yer the very lowest form of life on the Earth! But—'

*But somewhere in there, somethin' had to be real!*

Even the lies, might've been true!

—raged Nadeko.

No, perhaps there at least, she had not been raging.

Not rage. Not anger.

It may have been a wail.

From her heart—a wail, maybe.

A prayer, maybe.

‘Ain’t it been enough—why not forgive each other at last!? We’ve all got hurt, but ain’t that all just a problem of the heart!? It ain’t like anyone’s gone and died, so if we can let it go, ya can all come out lookin’ kind of cool, ya know!?’

Saying this, Nadeko, as though unable to hold back any longer—kicked over the desk too.

That too was probably an act done having seen that everyone had moved toward the back of the classroom.

‘Lies! Betrayals! Deceit! Hypocrisy! How about havin’ the tolerance to forgive it all—aaan!? Since when did the lot of ya become so high and mighty as to be finicky about other people!? Don’t be so damn fussy about the company ya keep!’

And then Nadeko at last—said.

Waisted.

‘I hate the bleedin’ lot of ya! But we’re classmates, damn it!’

## 019

Nadeko left school early. Of course she did.

You might even say she was rather too late in leaving early, but anyway, unable to stay where she was, she had flown out of the school.

She still had her indoor shoes on, but she didn’t care.

Nor did she have the strength to hide her face anymore.

She walked absentmindedly.

Absentminded, even more so than when she came to school.

No, now that she thinks back to it, her way there had been a jolly nice trip.

There had never been such a happy time.

Oh yes, it had been like the stairway to heaven.

Just what could Nadeko have been worried about back then?

‘Oi, oi, Nadeko-chan.’

From her right wrist came a voice.

It’s Serpent-san.

It’s been a while. Had he still been there?

‘Are ya all right? Yer real shaky on yer feet. Are ya sure where yer walking is the sidewalk and not

the roadway?"

'...Eh? You called?"

Still absentmindedly, she replies.

She's terribly dizzy, but of course she can at least give an answer.

Nadeko was a girl who kept it together.

'Do you have some business for Nadeko, whose life is over?"

'Nah, nah... It ain't over, is it? ...Nah, them's some scary eyes. Too vacant, ain't they? Like hollows, or knotholes I thought yer eyes were. A snake would slither into those holes.'

'Oooh...'

Nadeko's shoulders droop heavily.

No, never mind her shoulders, she's in a mood in which everything has drooped, or to go even further, she feels she herself has dropped all the way down.

The self-image that Nadeko had been building up until now, has come to nothing... It's all just crumbled away.

'It ain't like it were an image ya built because ya wanted to... What Nadeko-chan's so down about is beyond me.'

'Fufufufufu.'

'Creepy! What're ya laughing about?"

'.....'

She has to laugh.

Really she would like to cry, but when it truly hurts, the tears won't come.

'N-Now Nadeko... can never be a bride.'

'How do ya figure that one?"

'Correction... can never go to school.'

Even so, Nadeko did at least heed Serpent-san's advice and adjust her course, which had at some point strayed into the roadway, back onto the sidewalk.

If she got hit by a car, there's a risk it could be taken for suicide.

However, she was surprised at her own "hunger" to live, even in these circumstances.

'T-Truancy it'll have to be... From tomorrow Nadeko's a hikikomori...'

'It's fine, ain't it? It felt good, that bawling out! That scummy teacher and yer classmates—ya shut them all right up, didn't ya?"

'Th... That was because everyone... was shocked... flabbergasted.'

At the mention of it, she remembers it—remembers all their faces—and a headache overcomes her dizziness to assault Nadeko.

'They were all utterly appalled at seeing Nadeko trying to say something smart and failing.'

'Trying to say something smart and failing...?'

‘You can’t fail like that… By the end, it went past even “pitiable kid” through to “cringeworthy kid”, not even worth pity…’

And wincingly so. Ultra-cringe.

She’s Cringeko.

‘It’s all right, it weren’t that bad.’

‘It was… And to prove it, no one’s come after Nadeko…’

‘Ya wanted them to, did ya?’

‘No, but…’

‘Well what then?’

Her steps are unsteady, her heart too, and everything else.

She doesn’t know where she’s walking to—actually, just where is Nadeko walking to?

Her body is moving now according Nadeko’s will… However, it is Nadeko’s will which is all over the place.

‘Oh yeah, I hope this don’t need saying, but I want to be sure, Nadeko-chan.’

Serpent-san, seeming flabbergasted at her himself, indeed practically shaking his head, says to Nadeko.

‘What happened then, that weren’t me taking control of Nadeko-chan’s body and going around saying whatever I liked—don’t go thinking otherwise.’

‘……’

‘It were simply that the influence of being merged with me, found visible expression—the restraints ya normally keep yerself under simply came undone. Not even abnormal—they’re the things Nadeko-chan is usually thinking and feeling, which just brimmed over like what’s normal and—’

The usual. Like normal.

‘…Nadeko knows. Do shut up.’

Nadeko says.

…Shut up, she went and said.

She only needed to tell him she knew.

But she just had to lash out.

‘That was Nadeko… No one else but Sengoku Nadeko. That’s Nadeko herself… Nadeko just said what Nadeko wanted to say. Nadeko gets that. It isn’t like Serpent-san did something wrong…’

‘Right, exactly so—glad ya understand.’

‘But Nadeko does think Serpent-san is to blame.’

‘……’

Having Serpent-san bound to her wrist, merged with Nadeko—having him draining energy from Nadeko, couldn’t help but have an effect on her body and spirit.

Which is to say, that it found expression in that form—well, Nadeko’s will being disrupted by

having her fringe cut by Tsukihi-chan would not, of course, be unrelated either though...

She just said what she wanted to say.

That wasn't Serpent-san, but Nadeko.

What she had bottled up inside—all that stuff that she had assumed she would graduate and move on to her next school without ever having told to anyone.

Through that impetus, she had just “spat it out”.

Terrifyingly—that “loopy”, “cringeworthy”—and, of course, “pitiable” kid, had been none other than Sengoku Nadeko.

That tyranny. That incoherency.

That's all Sengoku Nadeko.

But.

‘Anyway... With the curtain having fallen on Nadeko's life and school career...’

With a sigh, she tries to start afresh.

Well, she can't start afresh, but with her fringe gone, she supposes she can see what's ahead, whether she wants to or not.

Even if it's only in her words, she will look ahead.

‘So then, if it's come to this, how about ending it all, Serpent-san?’

‘Aan?’

‘You have an idea of where your relic is, don't you? So rather than wait until night, why not go now? Serpent-san, you'd prefer doing it sooner, wouldn't you?’

‘Yeah, I guess... And it ain't like I absolutely have to sleep now.’

‘Yep. Then it's time to go. Ándale! Quickly find Serpent-san's relic, so that then you'll get your true powers back, and then...’

Nadeko says, without any particular feeling.

‘It'll be time to part ways.’

‘.....’

‘And then everything will be done with—that's fine by you, isn't it?’

What would happen after that... she couldn't think about.

Nothing would come to mind.

Only, now that so much has come to an end, she would just like to go through the bits and pieces that were not yet over, and one after another bring them to a close.

‘...Yeah, fine by me.’

Serpent-san agrees.

For the first time in a while—solemnly.

‘It's what I want—ain't no objection from me. No dependencies either—ain't nothing more I need than for me to get my body. Ain't like I got any interest in Nadeko-chan's life and I ain't gonna care

what ya do after that.'

'...Of course.'

She's not going to take offense. That would be foolish.

For one thing, it's mutual—it's not like Nadeko cares what Serpent-san does after this either.

It's not as though it's for Serpent-san's sake that Nadeko's searching for his body—it's purely for her own sake.

Absolution of her own sins. Atonement.

Just to clear her own conscience.

That's all she's doing it for.

'So... spit it out, Serpent-san, where should Nadeko go and search?'

Nadeko asked, for the sake of ending everything, and Serpent-san answered promptly.

So Serpent-san too must have hardened his resolve—the resolve to end everything.

'To Koyomi Onii-chan's house.'

The meaning of Serpent-san resolving himself—that was something Nadeko would learn a bit later.

That swift reply.

Was no great surprise.

'The end of everything, is there.'

## 020

At Koyomi Onii-chan's house, both parents work.

Nadeko has in the past asked what it is that they do, but both Koyomi Onii-chan and Tsukihi-chan would answer only vaguely: 'Well, public sector work. They're in the public sector.'

What's called singing from the same song sheet.

Rather suspicious.

Probably something going on there.

Nadeko does secretly wonder if they aren't engaged in some shady business.

But, well, even if it is underworld work, at the very least they don't work from home and during the day they're out—and it goes without saying that Koyomi Onii-chan, Tsukihi-chan and Karen-san all have school.

Admittedly those three siblings have rather the tendency to skip school, so it's true she has no guarantee that they are attending their classes today—however, even if they are truant, then they can be expected to be out somewhere, off saving people or the like, and therefore still shouldn't be at home.

Meaning, during the day, the Araragi residence will be unoccupied.

Completely unoccupied.

And therefore, if one were to sneak in, rather than the nighttime, the daytime would be better for it.

‘Sha! Sha!—Come to mention it, don’t they say cat burglaries happen more often in the day than at night? And on that subject, apparently having yer door unlocked when ya go out, or leaving a window open, can put a thief off entering. Rather than appealing to their better nature though, doing that presumably makes them think there might be someone inside.’

‘.....’

Nadeko doesn’t bother to acknowledge Serpent-san’s words—if he’s going to present knowledge pulled like that from Nadeko herself, she has no reply to make.

But what came next was not knowledge, but Serpent-san’s opinion.

‘Nadeko-chan might be like that too—by making yerself look defenseless and making yerself look harmless, ya live being protected by those around ya. Though in Nadeko-chan’s case—really, there is someone there inside.’

‘...Stop the meaningless conversation, Serpent-san.’

‘Aaan?’

‘Nothing will come of this conversation. All that’s left is to search through Koyomi Onii-chan’s house and find your corpse, isn’t it...? You don’t need to talk for that to get done, do you?’

She said.

While realizing she had called it a corpse rather than a relic, but not bothering to correct herself, Nadeko looks up—at the empty Araragi residence in front of her.

Right, how should she trespass?

‘First things first... there’s no mistake, is there, Serpent-san?’

‘Ah? About what?’

‘About your... relic being inside Koyomi Onii-chan’s house. That’s not another false reading, is it?’

It was a distrustful thing to say, but given that it had been Serpent-san’s false reading yesterday that lead to this, it wouldn’t just be Nadeko who would ask such a thing.

It’s not just precautionary.

‘Nah, nah, like I said, that false reading weren’t for nothing—in fact, ya could say it were all meant be. ’Cause it were thanks to that, that ya were found by Koyomi Onii-chan and we got inside this house, ya see. And so I found out the whereabouts of the relic.’

‘But... in Koyomi Onii-chan’s room, you didn’t have any kind of reading, did you?’

‘I were frantically suppressing it. Ain’t like we’d get away with that buzzing going off in front of someone, ya see—that’s why, in that room, I were quiet all along, right?’

‘.....’

So it hadn’t just been because someone had been there—certainly, even after Koyomi Onii-chan had been taken (dragged) out of the room by Shinobu-san and Nadeko had been alone in the room,

Serpent-san hadn't spoken a word.

So that had been because his energy was being used up?

'Okay... So that was why Serpent-san didn't save Nadeko from Tsukihi-chan's scissors...'

'Nah, that were just outright impossible.'

'But... it's curious, isn't it? Why would Serpent-san's relic be in Koyomi Onii-chan's house?'

It is curious.

She doesn't think Koyomi Onii-chan particularly has an interest in "antique collection"...

'Does it mean Koyomi Onii-chan, or someone from his family, took the relic out from the shrine...?'

'Nah, I doubt it—timewise, that ain't possible. Probably my relic had been taken somewhere, ther someone sought it out even before I did... and they entrusted it to Koyomi Onii-chan.'

And Koyomi Onii-chan had apparently not known about there being a shrine there—until she had had the "charm" put on her and had been researching how to undo it, Nadeko hadn't known either.

'But entrusted...? By who?'

'Who knows—could've been a Hawaiian shirt wearing specialist, couldn't it?'

'.....'

From the way he said it, like he was just throwing it out there, it seemed Serpent-san accepted that as the truth.

But a Hawaiian shirt wearing specialist...

Surely there can be only one such person in Japan?

'Well, any road, there ain't no guarantee. Could turn out to be another false reading. Go inside already and find out for me, Nadeko-chan.'

'Please don't say it so blithely...'

Her mood becomes leaden.

To think it would be indoors... Words like cat burglar and thief had come up earlier, but what Nadeko was about to do, really was of that nature.

Common sense would suggest that asking Koyomi Onii-chan or Tsukihi-chan and entering the house with permission would seem to be for the best... But then Koyomi Onii-chan is constantly with Shinobu-san and as for Tsukihi-chan, even without what had just recently happened, Nadeko's scared of her... The fact is that either of them would be hard to ask. And it would be hard explaining her reasons too.

So, she will just have to make like a burglar.

No, in fact, since she's planning on taking something out of the house, she really is a burglar.

'...Righto, Nadeko will do her best!'

Since hanging around in front of the house will look suspicious (and she's still in her uniform, so she risks getting pulled in for truancy), Nadeko steels herself, opens the gate to the Araragi residence and enters the premises.

Brazenly.

Just like she lived there.

...That Nadeko, who had lived her whole life always furtively, could behave in such a way... Perhaps this too was thanks to Tsukihi-chan cutting her fringe.

She doesn't know. Nadeko no longer knows her own self.

‘.....’

But suddenly putting a damper on her spirits, was that, of course, the front door was locked.

What's more, it's a double lock.

She hadn't noticed because it had been dark yesterday, but it looked to be a new door—perhaps they had refurbished recently?

‘What now, Serpent-san...?’

‘Heh... Whether refurbished or refitted, it's all meaningless before me—ya ain't gonna keep out a god.’

‘Oh...?’

She wonders what it could be. Perhaps like the rolling sabot she did at school, he intends to use supernatural power to blow the door away? If possible she would rather he didn't do something that could lead to trouble later...

Come to think of it, the likes of ghosts and vampires are said to be unable enter into enclosed spaces without people's permission—would anything like that apply to Serpent-san too?

Ah.

But speaking of enclosed spaces—

“Click! Click!”

While Nadeko had been away with her thoughts, two noises came from within the entryway—without even needing to check, those had been the sound of the locks coming undone.

When she hesitantly tries pulling on the door—with a slither, out come white snakes. Two of them—Nadeko immediately moved her feet aside, but by then the snakes had already disappeared.

Yes.

Like the illusions that had appeared from inside Nadeko's shoe compartment and desk.

‘Closed spaces ain't no good against me—rendering barriers useless is what I'm all about.’

‘.....’

How encouraging. If you're conducting a break-in.

So it would seem that those had not just been mere illusions—come to mention it, not only had she seen them, there had also been a sense of touch.

Hurriedly, Nadeko enters into the shoe changing area, shuts the door and re-locks it after her.

With such “expediency” you wouldn't think it was Nadeko.

Only, if she really, properly thinks about it, at that time, rather than locking the door, or for that

matter even opening it, Nadeko ought to have left that house with not a moment to lose—no, leaving the issue of ethics aside.

An oddity not stopped by barriers. An oddity that hides in enclosed spaces.

If she could just have contemplated what that meant, even a little bit.

Only, with the vibrations, nay, tremors, of Serpent-san starting to violently rotate on her wrist, she was granted no chance for that—it is a ferocious response.

I-If this is dowsing then—

It's on a different level to last night at the sandpit.

‘Kuh! ...It’s here all right.’

Saying this, Serpent-san stops the movement—she could tell just by looking at him that this was no easy act. To give some comparison, it was perhaps like stopping yourself shivering from coldness through your own willpower alone—it even looked painful.

‘W... Won’t be long, Serpent-san.’

With him suffering in front of her, it was impossible not to be concerned for him.

Nadeko took off her shoes (indoor shoes) and put them in a plastic bag she had prepared on the way, then stepped up onto the hallway floor.

‘Wh-Where would it be? Doesn’t... Koyomi Onii-chan’s room seem likely?’

‘Yeah... Right now I’m like a compass at a magnetic pole, so I can’t say exactly—but certainly, it’s Koyomi Onii-chan’s room that I’d suspect.’

Says Serpent-san.

His speech doesn’t quite seem to have its usual sharpness.

‘After all, Koyomi Onii-chan’s become something like halfway to being a specialist—and he’s got that legendary vampire at his command.’

‘.....’

At his command, huh.

From how Nadeko sees it, that relationship is rather different from that, though—of course, not that Koyomi Onii-chan is under Shinobu-san’s command either.

Somehow, that sort of relationship...

That sort of relationship...

‘...Best get moving.’

She climbs the stairs.

She had come here just yesterday, so she knows where she’s going—but she proceeds by creeping cautiously, tiptoeing lightly up to the 2nd floor.

While trying to think, just in case, of some excuse for if someone was still at home—“Terribly sorry, had to come back to pick up something left behind after yesterday’s visit. The front door hadn’t been locked.”—Nadeko reaches for the doorknob of Koyomi Onii-chan’s room.

The sense of immorality is terrific.

Only, resigned to her life already being over, Nadeko had the recklessness of desperation—bring it on, see if she cares, were the feelings that strongly gripped her.

And in fact, before too long it would indeed be brought on—before too long she would not care—but hopelessly unaware that it will come to such a pass, Nadeko did indeed enter Koyomi Onii-chan's room.

After she entered the room, the possibility belatedly occurred to her that perhaps Tsukihi-chan, having been beaten by Koyomi Onii-chan, might be resting in the room next door, but, well, from how things had looked, Nadeko considers the possibility that she had been hospitalized more likely, and given that Nadeko had got this far without being challenged, she thinks it must be all right.

...She prays that Tsukihi-chan had made it to school though... She may have done something horrible to Nadeko, but she is a friend even so.

‘...A friend even so, huh. Yep... If only Nadeko had been able to think like that.’

‘Aaan?’

‘Meaning that time... when that girl put the “charm” on Nadeko... By then, Nadeko had already stopped thinking of her as a friend... But there were surely other paths where it wasn’t like that—’

That rant she had given to her class.

That must have been what Nadeko had wanted to say to herself—surely.

‘...But it’s too hard to do that. Who’s that saintly? Just as that girl’s no saint, Nadeko isn’t either. If someone’s unpleasant to you, you’ll hate them. If someone’s kind to you, you’ll grow to like them.’

‘Candid talk time, is it? What’s up, Nadeko-chan?’

‘Nothing especially...’

To begin with, Nadeko shut the door to Koyomi Onii-chan’s room and then took a peek under the bed first—though of course, it wouldn’t be hidden there, would it?

But if a Hawaiian shirt wearing specialist—in other words, Oshino-san—had entrusted “that” to Koyomi Onii-chan, she expects that rather than putting it out on display, he would have hidden it somewhere.

‘But if you think it over, that’s how it is, isn’t it? ...The people Nadeko grows to like are the ones kind to Nadeko, and the people Nadeko grows to hate are the ones mean to Nadeko...’

‘.....’

‘Learning to like people who don’t think anything of Nadeko, let alone people who hate Nadeko... it’s impossible, isn’t it? When it comes to socializing, the way the other person feels really matters a lot.’

‘...But then if ya suppose Nadeko-chan’s feelings are important to that other person too—they’re probably not gonna want hang out with someone who feels like Nadeko-chan, are they?’

‘.....’

‘Come to that, that boy who asked Nadeko-chan out? Ya don’t remember his name or his face at all,

do ya? Never mind that ya didn't know him before then, that ya won't even learn the name of a person who said he fancied ya—that sounds like ya got a bit of an issue with yer personality, don't it—aaan?"

‘.....’

‘Well, it's to hide that personality that ya don't say what yer really thinking, always silently staring at the ground instead, ain't it?—Sha! Sha!’

‘...True.’

With an oh, Serpent-san reacts oddly.

That Nadeko had been honest enough to agree, was probably surprising to him—perhaps it is surprising.

Because Nadeko is a kid who isn't honest.

She hates saying what she really thinks.

She hates doing things.

That's surely because—she's not nice.

She's not the slightest bit—amiable.

‘About what Tsukihi-chan said.’

Nadeko says to Serpent-san, while scouring Koyomi Onii-chan's room—no, while it's taking the form of a conversation with Serpent-san, it's something close to talking to herself.

At least, Nadeko had no expectations for a reaction from Serpent-san.

‘What she said was probably right.’

‘Aaan?’

‘Nadeko being in love with Koyomi Onii-chan is because that way Nadeko avoids getting hurt... After all, you see, romance uses loads of energy, doesn't it?’

Not quite like Serpent-san though, says Nadeko.

‘Falling in love with someone, or having someone fall for you... So then instead, being “engrossed” in a love that will never be granted, could actually make things easier... You don't need to make hard choices and you don't need to face uncertainty, just like Tsukihi-chan said.’

‘.....’

‘It's hard to explain otherwise, isn't it? Nadeko was trying to make those excuses this morning... but the idea that a girl as flighty as Nadeko could be single-mindedly in love for as long as six years with a friend's older brother who she barely knew... it's scarcely likely, is it?’

It wasn't like anything in particular had happened.

There had been stuff, but nothing had really happened—not like in a story.

Tsukihi-chan had said what she said and accepted it could happen, but at that time, when Nadeko had been in the 2nd year of elementary school, there hadn't actually been any prominent incident—like being rescued when she was nearly hit by a car, or saved when being bullied, or anything like that—they had simply played games together in Tsukihi-chan's room.

If pushed.

That he was Tsukihi-chan's older brother—that he was Araragi Koyomi would probably be all there had been.

In other words, all she could say was that—and this isn't really a phrase that ought to be used to talk about a man, but—he had been a “flower on a high peak”, so she could fall in love with him safely.

‘Falling in love with someone is a simply marvelous thing, Nadeko believes—with just that you feel like going on living, and with just that you cheer up, and you fill with a warm and fuzzy feeling.’

‘.....’

‘The world is full of hardships, there are so many unpleasant things and so much that doesn't go your way, troubles are only ever piling higher, things which you thought everyday break down all too soon, supposedly reliable rules turn out to be unreliable, and both your body and spirit soon tire and wear out, until eventually you just want to drop down right there, but despite all that, through the emotion of being in love with someone, you can find the strength to persevere, Nadeko believes.’

‘.....’

‘Even when you want to cry, you can laugh, Nadeko believes—That may be why.’

Nadeko says, punctuating her words.

Like she were laying it out to someone.

‘That may be why Nadeko fell in love with Koyomi Onii-chan—just falling in love with someone for the sake of gaining emotional stability.’

‘For the sake—of gaining emotional stability.’

‘After all, if you really think about it, it's creepy, isn't it? It's just creepy, right? Maybe that was also the kind of thing Tsukihi-chan was trying to say. Loving someone for all those years without meeting him... In a story that might be attractive, it might be romantic... but frankly that's basically a stalker, right? Taken that far, it's obsessive.’

Says Nadeko, rambling on.

‘Nadeko did some thinking... About the meaning of that thing Tsukihi-chan had said. It's tiresome, but there wasn't anything else to do—so Nadeko thought about it.’

‘.....’

‘That thing about ideals that are too high spoiling a person—well, more accurately, she'd said those were Hanekawa-san's words... But that's probably about how dreams that can never come true, can be pursued without worry, isn't it?’

A dream that can never come true. An ideal that can never be reached.

A thing sought that you can never find.

With something like that—even if it's not granted, even if it's not found, even if it's not reached, *you wouldn't get hurt.*

Nothing need change. Nothing need be done.

‘If a realistic dream didn't come true, it'd be a blow, wouldn't it? ...Adopting unreachable ideals

must be a way of protecting yourself. Since when they don't come true, you can just say you knew it would turn out that way.'

Rather than dreaming, face reality.

Just how many setbacks must Tsukihi-chan have experienced—how much had she had to learn, to be able to speak the way she had to Nadeko, as though she had known of what she spoke?

Probably the kind of experience and knowledge, Nadeko thinks, that if she had gone through it, she would surely have been broken by it—her life would have come to an end.

Yes.

If it had been Tsukihi-chan who had snapped at her teacher and turned everyone in her class against her—she would probably think nothing of it.

If it had been Tsukihi-chan, rather than running out of the school afterward—she would probably have taken her classes with a face like butter wouldn't melt.

That's the Tsukihi-chan that Nadeko—

‘...You know, the person Nadeko was attracted to first, might've been Tsukihi-chan. Nadeko may have wanted to become sisters with Tsukihi-chan... by falling in love with Koyomi Onii-chan...’

‘.....’

‘Nadeko sometimes finds herself looking for things to like about Koyomi Onii-chan.’

‘.....’

‘Hm.....’

While she spoke, Nadeko had not for a moment paused from the task at hand, but she could find nothing that looked like it might be Serpent-san's relic.

Perhaps it's not in this room.

But she thinks Koyomi Onii-chan's room is just about the limit of what she could be forgiven for searching through... Hmm.

Now that she looks at Koyomi Onii-chan's room like this though, it's rather lacking in individuality.

It might be fair to say there's no sense of anything of Koyomi Onii-chan here—there's not much sign of what the person who normally uses this room is like.

There's almost no items that seem to indicate interests or preferences. Even the books lining the bookshelves are all famous ones, and don't display Koyomi Onii-chan's outré tastes.

It was just like a hotel room.

Only the bare minimum of things were there... As though to be able to leave here at any time—like preparations for that had been made in advance.

.....

If a family member's room were like this, it would be quite a cause for concern—was what she found herself thinking.

‘...Ah.’

No sooner had she been having those pensive thoughts, than she discovered items which made

interests and preferences all too starkly clear.

They are smutty books.

A collection, in the desk's lowest drawer.

'Uwah. Uwah. Uwah.'

'...Oi, Nadeko-chan?'

'Th-This'd make anyone's family concerned...'

She pulls out the one from the top.

It has a quite extraordinary cover.

Described in specifics, it's... well, how to put it... there's a girl with twin tails and... No!

Nadeko can say no more of it than that.

'G-Goodness. This is rather specialist... Well, well, well, Koyomi Onii-chan... He's quite the connoisseur... N-No, but for what it is...'

'Oi, Nadeko-chan.'

'Quiet. Serpent-san's relic could perhaps be between the pages of a book like this, couldn't it?'

'Nah... It ain't never gonna be something thin enough for that...'

'Uh-huh.'

She gives it a further examination.

Page by page, making sure not to miss anything.

It would be terrible if she were to overlook Serpent-san's relic, wouldn't it?

'About Nadeko...'

'Hm?'

'About Nadeko not calling herself "I" or "me" and the reason for that... Why do you think it is?'

'I ain't gonna know, am I? Think for yerself.'

'That.'

'Huh?'

'That's probably it—there isn't a "self". Not for Nadeko.'

Nadeko says, as she reaches for the second book, having finished reading the first.

Completely different, the second was a foreign assortment.

How... How very indecent.

This is too much. Far too much.

'Nadeko... doesn't have a self.'

This is another thing she had thought about.

Even though she really hadn't wanted to.

'Self? Do ya not mean self-confidence?'

'Nope. Self. Just, self.'

‘What’re ya talking about, Nadeko-chan—you right there, that ain’t anybody but yer own self, right?’  
Those hands. Those legs. And that body.

Down to every single hair on yer head—that’s all you, ain’t it?

Says Serpent-san.

‘—So ya do have a self, don’t ya?’

‘Yep... Of course, that’s “someone” called Sengoku Nadeko. The “someone” who everyone calls “Sengoku”. The someone they call “Nadeko”. There’s “someone” who Serpent-san calls “Nadeko-chan”—right here. A girl, a second-year middle school student, currently searching through Koyomi Onii-chan’s room, certainly exists.’

But that isn’t “me”.

That isn’t what “I” can think of as “me”.

‘To “me”, Nadeko is another person—so Nadeko doesn’t call Nadeko “me”.’

‘.....’

‘The Sengoku Nadeko who everyone thinks of is not “me”—so when they say Sengoku Nadeko is cute, they’re not talking about “me”.’

It’s like she feels she’s living another person’s life.

Like she doesn’t have a self.

Living the way she’s told by others.

Just reacting to what she’s told by others.

Without ever herself doing something of her own accord—of course not.

Because Nadeko doesn’t have a self.

She’s not even empty—externally, and also internally, there is a person who Nadeko doesn’t really understand—

‘Bollocks to that. So basically, yer a brat, is what yer saying.’

‘.....’

‘Upshot is, it’s the same reason as why little kids talk about themselves by name, ain’t it? ’Cause everyone calls them that, so that’s the way they “understand” themselves—basically means they ain’t formed an ego. Right—the way that teacher talked about himself like “Sensei” this and “Sensei” that is the same deal. By presenting himself that way, it’s kind of keeping an awareness that “Sensei” is “Sensei”, see?’

‘...Meaning, Nadeko doesn’t have an ego... As in, what being herself is...’

‘It ain’t like that’s a bad thing—in and of itself. There ain’t all that much value, really, in living being yerself.’

‘But... without an ego, without a self... there isn’t any meaning in being here, is there?’

‘It’s the weight of that meaning that Nadeko-chan can’t cope with, can ya?’

‘.....’

It's as he says.

It's not that Nadeko especially wants a "me".

If she were pressed on there being something she wants—

'The third volume...'

Oh, what's all this then?

Can it really be all right for a high school boy to own such a thing? If it were to become known that he had this, his whole life would risk ruin.

'Perhaps it'd be best to take this home, as Serpent-san's relic...'

'Just what do ya take my relic for...?'

'Ah.'

With a flutter.

Something fell out from that third book—a bookmark perhaps?

But Koyomi Onii-chan would have to be surprisingly methodical to use a bookmark in a gravure album like this... So would having a bookmark placed here, mean this page was one of Koyomi Onii-chan's favorites?

In that case, it requires a careful check.

Well, well, what's here to see?

'In fact, Nadeko—just like Serpent-san said at some point—doesn't feel too sorry.'

'Aan?'

'Serpent-san's kin? Brethren? Underlings... Clan? Meaning... those snakes that Nadeko killed lots of... and in such a cruel way.'

She doesn't feel regret. She doesn't feel remorse.

She doesn't feel—anything.

'It couldn't be helped, Nadeko thinks... After all, Nadeko had thought that unless that was done, Nadeko was going to die. It's possible that maybe Nadeko does feel remorse, but "I" don't.'

'...But that massacre were pointless. If anything it only made things worse for Nadeko-chan.'

'Even so, it couldn't be helped... Since Nadeko didn't know any better.'

'.....'

'It couldn't be helped. Yep. Nadeko just leaves everything at that. After all... everything about herself, is someone else's issue.'

Even breaking into Koyomi Onii-chan's house like this—"It couldn't be helped" is how she thinks of it. Probably, even if someone were to get mad at her for it—she'll just apologize.

After all, the other person is angry.

So she apologizes, doesn't she?

Like it's someone else's issue.

'And because Serpent-san is angry—Nadeko's making atonement like this.'

‘Nah, it ain’t like I’m angry—’

‘Probably, even if Nadeko killed a person, Nadeko would just say “It couldn’t be helped”—’

‘Nadeko-chan!’

Serpent-san suddenly called out—taken by surprise, Nadeko stopped just as she had been about to turn the page.

‘Wh-What? ...Is there something about the girl on this page?’

‘Nah, not that... It’s that bookmark that were on this page.’

‘Bookmark?’

Does he mean the bookmark that fell on the floor?

Could it be that this bookmark was a limited edition bonus, and has a photo of a girl on the other side, perhaps?—Nadeko picks up the bookmark, from where it had fallen face down.

And when she does:

‘Ah...’

What was drawn on the front—was a picture of a snake.

It’s eating its own tail.

A drawing of—the Ouroboros.

‘Actually... rather than a bookmark... isn’t this a talisman...?’

She recalls.

The talisman which, in June, Koyomi Onii-chan had put up on the sanctuary of North White Snake Shrine—that talisman which Oshino-san had entrusted to Koyomi Onii-chan.

It resembles that. There’s a “correspondence”.

She seems to recall hearing that the work of putting the talisman up on the shrine had been worth more than five million yen—however, that talisman had script written on it, whereas on this one an illustration was drawn, so perhaps it might be reasoned that saying they “resemble” each other is a stretch.

Only.

For the drawing, and for the writing too—the red brushwork used—the style of it—seems to be, very much, the same sort—

‘...So that’s how it is.’

Says Serpent-san.

‘So it were preserved *in that form*—my relic weren’t preserved materially, but as an “image”... I never guessed. Sha! Sha!’

‘An image...’

Not as a corpse.

Nor bones or even a mummy...

That makes sense. If it’s like this, carrying it away, storing it and hiding it would all be simpler—

and she could also understand how Serpent-san, even with his strong dowsing ability, might struggle to find it. But...

An image?

‘C-Can something like this be an object of worship...? It’s all just flat—isn’t it?’

‘It can.’

Even if it’s flat.

Serpent-san counters Nadeko’s doubt.

He says it matter-of-factly.

‘You humans, ya treat “images” as objects of worship like it were only natural.’

‘W-Well, certainly there’s moe and idolizing and such, but that’s only in modern culture...’

‘Nah, nah, I don’t mean that.’

‘O-Or not photos but even drawings—is it that sort of thing you’re talking about?’

‘...I’m talking about artists like Rembrandt or Da Vinci, of course.’

‘Ohh...’

Of course.

Now that it’s pointed out, that is worship—yes.

‘Well, it ain’t limited to images, but also music, writing and so on—there ain’t nothing that can’t be an object of worship. ’Course, that includes a corpse or a rock or a tree.’

‘.....’

Hearing that, Nadeko looks the talisman over once again—hmm.

But it looks like it’s only a picture though.

It’s not the same as the sorts of images that become objects of worship, she thinks.

If she didn’t know it was a talisman, even now it would look like only a bookmark... But that may be exactly why this served as a hiding place.

No one would normally think that the sacred relic of a shrine would be hidden within a filthy book—come to that, wouldn’t Koyomi Onii-chan be in for retribution? It makes her think, Koyomi Onii-chan having a run of bad luck recently, could even turn out to have been down to this...

‘By making it an “image”, they “eternally preserve” the existence, the concept—pretty smart. But I never thought that I, this Serpent-sama, would have such a flat body—Sha! Sha! It’s like Nadeko-chan says—sometimes it’s yer own self that ya don’t really know.’

‘...So, then, you’re fine with this?

While turning the talisman over, back and forth—Nadeko checks with Serpent-san.

The final check.

‘With this, you can get back your real power... and so, from now on, you won’t have to worry about running out of energy, and can go on existing—’

‘Well, it ain’t gonna be forever though—the paper’s like a copy and it ain’t like I can get back the

faith that were lost. But, well, I'll be able to go on for centuries, I reckon—that's much longer than electronic books, ya know. Right, Nadeko-chan. Go on and *feed* me the talisman.'

'...Feed...'

'Don't ya worry, I'll keep my promise—I'll restore Nadeko-chan's fringe, like I said. Nah, maybe just that ain't enough to thank ya. If ya got any other wish, I'll grant it for ya.'

Serpent-san was in a good mood like never before—it may be fair to say he's on a high. It's not hard to understand.

His own, much sought after body—his energy source, has at last been found.

'.....'

'Hm? Ain't ya got one, Nadeko-chan? A desire? No matter how tall an order it is, I don't mind. "Make the stuff at school today never have happened," for instance—I'll have plenty of energy to do that much.'

'...A tall order...'

A flower—on a high peak.

A desire.

Like when praying for something when visiting a shrine—in that case, what would Nadeko wish for? For a kid called Sengoku Nadeko.

What would "I" wish for?

'No need to make it not have happened.'

'Aan? Really, Nadeko-chan—after ya said all that about yer life being over? Well, in fact it'd be more a case of "erase everyone's memory," though—but yer fine with yer life ended, are ya, aaan?'

'It's all the same anyway... Nadeko, you know, is a kid who's no good at being part of a group.'

'Oh? Well, I suppose so.'

'But there are times Nadeko also thinks about how conceited it is to say that—basically saying that means you don't think of the people around you as belonging with you. Being afraid of the words "pair up with who you like"—is because Nadeko doesn't have anyone she likes.'

'.....'

'So, it's all the same—to Nadeko, Nadeko was basically finished to begin with. Since ages ago, Nadeko had long been finished. It's just "I" didn't look to see it. She was finished, she is finished, not just today, and regardless of whether she gets a charm put on her or whatever else happens.'

She was finished.

'...So, there's nothing then?'

Says Serpent-san.

His high spirits and excitement had vanished—he's talking earnestly now.

'Nothing Nadeko-chan would like to ask for, of a god?'

'Something to ask for...'

‘Something ya want to pray for, is fine too.’

She thinks.

She thinks about that question.

It’s tiresome—but she thinks.

‘...Having Nadeko’s love...’

Nadeko says.

Tiresome words.

‘Having Nadeko’s love for Koyomi Onii-chan reciprocated... would you grant even a wish like that?’

‘No can do, Sengoku.’

Who had said that from behind Nadeko—was not Serpent-san.

She can tell without turning around.

Right now, right behind Nadeko—he’s there.

Koyomi Onii-chan.

Araragi Koyomi is there.

## 021

For reference, let’s go over just how harsh, just how improbable, just how grave the current situation—the narratively seemingly climatic—current situation is.

Nadeko doesn’t think she can convey it in words, but nevertheless, she ought to make her utmost effort.

Effort is important.

She hates making an effort, but this is surely the very last effort of Nadeko’s life, after all—Er, so let’s see.

First off, Nadeko is currently in Koyomi Onii-chan’s house, in Koyomi Onii-chan’s room. Incidentally, this is trespassing. Taking it upon herself to open the locked front door, going so far as to cover up her entry by putting her shoes into a plastic bag to carry with her, she has committed the crime of housebreaking.

Furthermore, she is searching through Koyomi Onii-chan’s room.

Even among family, this would be an intolerable act.

Despite owing more than she could ever hope to repay to Koyomi Onii-chan—despite it being no exaggeration to say that he had saved her life, this is how she pays him back.

On top of housebreaking, an invasion of privacy.

And—while this is hardly the place to use the words “if only that were all”—if only that were all, for now Nadeko, having finished reading and left discarded on the floor two of the lewd books which Koyomi Onii-chan had kept in his desk drawer, had a third spread out upon her lap.

And in those circumstances.

And having been witnessed in those circumstances—she had gone and said it.

Her love for Koyomi Onii-chan.

Reciprocated.

She had gone and said—

‘.....!’

Turning both pale and bright red, Nadeko’s face must surely be colored like marble.

She can’t move. She can’t stand up.

She can’t even turn around—nor even blink.

A dream. This has got to be a dream.

Nadeko must be dreaming—how silly of her.

Nadeko really is silly.

Didn’t Tsukihi-chan tell her?

She ought to face reality—

‘Listen, Sengoku. Sengoku Nadeko.’

Heedless of Nadeko’s flight from reality, from behind her, Koyomi Onii-chan’s voice continues—a voice dead of emotion, unreadable.

It wouldn’t allow her to run from reality.

Into dreams, she cannot go.

‘I’m not going to do anything to you... So chill out. Okay?’

Chill out? What kind of mission impossible is that?

Koyomi Onii-chan is asking too much of Nadeko.

Chill out?

Does that mean die?

‘Gently—just put that on the floor.’

She doesn’t know what he’s saying.

Koyomi Onii-chan’s words, normally so pleasant to hear, don’t seem to come through to her at all.

Why would Koyomi Onii-chan be here?

What about school? What about saving people?

What could have happened—well, not that she knows whether he had been off saving people or not.

But then, what is he doing?

‘Can you hear me? Sengoku. Put that on the floor. Just do that and it’ll be okay. Everything will all

work out.'

'.....'

That?

Does he mean the gravure book on Nadeko's lap? Ah, yes, certainly she ought to get rid of that without delay. It's bad for her education.

But please listen, Koyomi Onii-chan, it's not how it looks. It's not that Nadeko searched Koyomi Onii-chan's room looking for this sort of book.

She didn't commit a crime for the sake of that.

Only, the way things stood, she had no grounds to offer excuses—however anyone looked at her now, Nadeko was a precocious, prurient girl, rapt with curiosity.

'S-S-S-S-S-S-S...'

Trembling voice, trembling tongue, trembling lips.

Her tongue was tied fast like never before—even while her head span.

But still, with all her body's strength she called out.

To Serpent-san on her wrist—pleading for help.

'P-please, Serpent-san... Th-there's no point hiding anything now...'

It doesn't matter if they're found out.

It doesn't matter if Koyomi Onii-chan finds out that Nadeko isn't a victim or anything else—go ahead and explain everything.

It doesn't matter. Anything and everything—it doesn't matter.

'S-Serpent-san—'

But Serpent-san doesn't reply.

On Nadeko's right-hand wrist, he makes no movement—ever since Koyomi Onii-chan's arrival, it's exactly like he has turned into just an accessory.

'—Wh-Why?'

Why won't he speak for her?

There's no point now that it's come to this juncture, in keeping the promise not to talk or move in front of people.

'S-Serpent-san...'

'Sengoku. Can you hear me?'

Koyomi Onii-chan's low voice continues.

As though he too, might not have heard her pleas to Serpent-san for help—

'Okay? Put that down.'

Says Koyomi Onii-chan.

'Put that talisman—on the floor.'

He says.

‘.....’

.....  
Talisman?

He means the talisman?

The bookmark—that had been in this gravure book.

The drawing of the Ouroboros.

He means... Serpent-san's relic?

‘Ko—’

Huh?

Isn't that—not quite right? Isn't something wrong here?

Wait a second—does that mean that Koyomi Onii-chan *knows* why Nadeko was searching through his room?

Without needing Serpent-san to explain—how could that be?

Koyomi Onii-chan shouldn't know anything about it, should he—

‘Ko...’

Nadeko.

With the gravure book still on her lap—manages to twist her head to look behind.

‘Koyomi Onii-chan... H-how?’

And she asks.

‘How—does Koyomi Onii-chan... know so much... know everything?’

‘I don't know everything. Just what I know.’

Now that she looks, it's not just Koyomi Onii-chan who's there—next to a uniformed Koyomi Onii-chan is a little blonde girl in a dress, Oshino Shinobu-san.

As if it were only natural that she would be there—

There beside Koyomi Onii-chan.

The little girl with her ghastly grin—is watching Nadeko.

With her fangs bared, her jaw raised.

Looking down at her—and scorning her.

She, who ought to be nocturnal, was there, in the daytime, watching Nadeko.

‘.....’

‘Sengoku—’

In contrast, Koyomi Onii-chan, his face serious, was looking straight at Nadeko.

This is what's meant by a piercing gaze.

While he did look like he was angry, more than that—Koyomi Onii-chan also looked troubled.

Troubled?

No—Nadeko was troubling him.

Troubling her beloved Koyomi Onii-chan.

‘—That.’

He pointed to the talisman.

“That” which Nadeko held in her left hand—he calls “that”.

‘That is a thing far more dangerous than you think—right now you can still turn back. You made a slight mistake—but it’s okay. Everyone makes mistakes—it’s only that this time it was you who made one.’

‘.....’

A mistake? Turn back?

That this, this talisman, isn’t what Nadeko thinks—what could that mean?

If it isn’t what Nadeko thinks it is... then what could it be instead, that she doesn’t think it is?

Just how much—does Koyomi Onii-chan really know?

And what does he not know?

‘...I-It isn’t a... mistake.’

Says Nadeko. In these circumstances, sitting right in front of Koyomi Onii-chan, she makes her assertion—hesitantly though it was, even so, she felt that if she hadn’t, something important inside her would have crumbled.

It was foolishness.

Something important inside her?—That had crumbled long ago.

‘Na... Nadeko did what Nadeko ought to do... even though it was tiresome, it couldn’t be helped... and really Nadeko didn’t want to do it... but even so, it had to be done...’

With only the very start having any assertiveness—and even that start probably wouldn’t have seemed assertive to anyone else—she got more muddled as she went on.

She was becoming nonsensical.

Unable to withstand the look from Koyomi Onii-chan... Nadeko turned to face forward again.

If she had had her fringe she would have been able to just lower her face.

Now she had her back turned to Koyomi Onii-chan.

As though she might be being defiant.

As though she might be being antagonistic.

‘It... It couldn’t be helped, it couldn’t be helped, it couldn’t be helped.’

‘Right. I get it. It’s okay, Sengoku—’

Koyomi Onii-chan’s voice was all gentleness.

As though enveloping Nadeko, there was not a drop of hostility in it—she could find herself wanting to entrust everything to it.

‘—But that’s a very dangerous item. It’s as dangerous as can be. An item that carries disaster.

Something which, having been given it, entrusted with it, I had been unable decide how to deal with, and had resigned to put away there and try to forget about—something which even Shinobu can't eat. It's not something you can do anything with. So—'

‘.....’

That's—certainly so.

It is a sacred relic after all.

It had been worshiped at a shrine as a god—it's not something which a mere middle school kid such as Nadeko ought to have in her hands.

But—

‘B-But, Koyomi Onii-chan, Na... Nadeko has to do something with it... Because, you see, fo Nadeko this is atonement.’

‘Atonement?’

Koyomi Onii-chan seemed to react to that word.

And it was a reaction of suspicion.

It was as though the words he had heard were all too out of place—a reaction as though upon seeing a sewing machine on an operating table.

‘Ye... Yep. Atonement...’

Says Nadeko in spite of that.

As if she might hope to improve this situation, if only she tries hard enough to explain—as if she had mistaken this situation, for one that was not already closed—for one in which something could be done.

‘Na... Nadeko's not a victim... Not a victim... Well, also a victim, but of course a victimizer too...’

And so.

She has to atone—huh?

Isn't something odd?

‘...I see. I get that you had stuff weighing on you. I'm sorry, for not realizing.’

I heard what happened at school, said Koyomi Onii-chan—Eh, what happened at school?

Does he mean Nadeko becoming Madderko?

How would that have reached Koyomi Onii-chan?—No, that may not be strange enough to tilt her head over. At her school too, there were lots of Tsukihi-chan's and Karen-chan's friends, such that if any incidents happen, word of it will get passed to them, and “that” would have been taken to be quite enough of an incident.

And if it reached the Fire Sisters, presumably it would reach Koyomi Onii-chan—especially considering what had happened just this morning.

So, is that why Koyomi Onii-chan returned home?

After receiving word that Nadeko had left school early? No—perhaps there had been that too, but it

couldn't just be that. If it had just been that, that wouldn't be sufficient for him to have known that Nadeko had headed for Koyomi Onii-chan's house.

Then there must be something.

Something that Nadeko doesn't know, that Koyomi Onii-chan does know.

...But so what if there is?

What of it then?

That doesn't matter anymore.

Whatever Koyomi Onii-chan knows and whatever Nadeko doesn't—none of it matters.

After all—he already knows.

The feelings Nadeko had most of all not wanted him to know.

So nothing else can matter anymore to Nadeko—it's all over.

If everything's going to end—let it all end.

'I'm sorry I didn't realize.'

Says Koyomi Onii-chan—she's not quite sure what he's referring to.

He hadn't realized—he says?

But Nadeko hadn't wanted him to realize.

She had wanted it to just be left to be—she hadn't wanted him to realize. That Nadeko was this awful girl, she had wanted to keep from Koyomi Onii-chan at least.

*She had wanted to be a girl who was only cute.*

'I'll apologize—so Sengoku, for now, give me that talisman.'

'.....'

'You.'

Koyomi Onii-chan—says.

With a touch of sadness in his tone.

'You always are like this—when I speak with you, it's like I'm bothering you.'

'.....!'

Eh.

Please wait a minute.

That's not right.

It's not like that. Nadeko doesn't keep her face down when she speaks to Koyomi Onii-chan for that kind of reason—Nadeko...

'Are you like that with everybody who talks to you? Is it a nuisance when someone tries to approach you? Does everyone seem like an enemy? If that's the case, I suppose that's fine too. If you say you hate me—it can't be helped.'

It can't be helped?

Please don't say such a thing.

Didn't she just say? He heard, didn't he?

Or did he not hear?

That Nadeko loves—

'But Sengoku, if nothing else, at least put that talisman—'

'Might you not cease this dallying, my liege?'

It was then that Shinobu-san, having until now held silent, cut Koyomi Onii-chan short. Tremendous ill will in her tone, without a trace of sympathy there, in stark contrast to Koyomi Onii-chan—she was all too hostile toward Nadeko.

'There is no need to treat gently a spoiled, unheeding brat. 'Tis well to strike her and steal it. You can give her sense and reason to hear after. Nay—she need not hear even after. An ignorant girl such as she, deserves no better than to be cast aside. Pitiable and adorable. 'Twould be a mercy to let her go on being a victim.'

'Shinobu...'

Koyomi Onii-chan began to reply.

'You need not give consideration to a girl who thinks only of herself even in such circumstances, my liege. No doubt, you would as ever endeavor to save whomever and whatever—but nor is there any doubt either, that you cannot answer the self-centered desires of this girl.'

Shinobu-san said flatly.

Words too cold to grasp who they were cold toward.

The iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire.

That was supposed to be Shinobu-san's tagline—but as she was now, she was nothing but cold-blooded alone.

Like a snake.

Cold-blooded.

'A naught but adorable brat—*a naught but self-adoring* brat, may best be forsaken. Keep a rein on your philanthropy—meet sin with punishment. The girl ought be taught—the same as I was.'

'...S-Say what you want...'

Nadeko has to argue back.

That she was nothing but adorable.

That she was nothing but self-adoring—told all that, of course she couldn't stay silent.

She couldn't stay silent.

'Th-That's not true... W-Well, it might be... Nadeko may only be doing it for Nadeko's own sake... But it's atonement, but it's a dodge, but, but...'

Serpent-san.

Serpent-san who had lost his energy, who had been like a candle in the wind—that Nadeko had done

it to help him.

It wasn't as though those feelings, at least to some extent, some small extent, weren't—

‘Ple... Please, say something, Serpent-san.’

Nadeko said to the oddity—the god on her right wrist.

‘Don't stay silent... Please—help Nadeko. Nadeko needs you to... *protect her.*’

You.

You're a god, aren't you?

‘Can you not spare us this, Forelock Girl?’

Shinobu-san says, exasperated.

That name for Nadeko had already become unfitting, but of course that could hardly matter to Shinobu-san.

For an oddity such as Shinobu-san, such small distinguishing features of humans didn't matter. After all, she was a specialist in eating oddities—

‘Stop depending on that “Serpent-san”—*that god not even revived*—and forthwith hand over that talisman. That charmed talisman which my liege was entrusted by Gaen Izuko—’

Eh?

Hearing that, Nadeko looks at the talisman, with its drawing of a snake.

And then at her own right-hand wrist.

The thing bound there—no.

The thing wrapped there, was merely.

Was merely a white scrunchie—good for tying up hair.

## 022

‘Shinobu, don't say anything to provoke her—Sengoku!’

Even as she heard Koyomi Onii-chan yell out, Nadeko had taken the talisman she held in her right hand—and eaten it.

She swallowed it.

She had put the talisman, with its drawing of a snake, into her mouth.

And like a snake, taking it in as one mouthful—she had gulped it down.

‘Stop, Sengoku! There's still—’

‘There's naught!’

Nadeko felt Shinobu-san, shouting over Koyomi Onii-chan's words, take a leap toward her—but of course she would feel it.

Nadeko, as she is now, can see the world with more than vision.

She can feel heat.

People's body heat.

The warmth of people's skin—is visible to her.

That's because—Nadeko is herself a snake.

'She must be eaten! There's naught else to do for her—'tis too late!'

'T-Too late? That at least—'

Nadeko turns around—this time with her whole body.

No, in fact, before she had turned—it had started.

The transformation had started.

That it was too late. That it was past late.

"I" know better than anyone!"

Snakes.

They are snakes—the hairs of Nadeko's head have all *become* snakes—white snakes.

It's no illusion.

Physically, genuinely—one hundred thousand snakes nested in Nadeko's hair. No, it's strange to say they nest there—since those hundred thousand snakes are all Nadeko—and they're all "me".

Snakes that are Nadeko.

And Nadeko who is a snake.

'Shaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaan!'

The snakes—grow longer.

Like the bodies of living creatures growing, or like the hairs which they had been—but extending at a terrific rate, they reach for Shinobu-san, and before she could get her teeth into Nadeko's throat, entangle her.

Entangle.

And bite her.

'Guh... Accursed... reptile...'

Shinobu-san is forced back.

Just how much power she currently held couldn't be judged by her external appearance—there were times when her age changed in response to her power and times when it didn't—but it seemed that the sheer quantity of snakes was at least enough to physically drive her back.

Growing snakes.

Growing hair.

Nadeko's fringe too, grew instantly—Serpent-san had said that if he got his powers returned, he would make Nadeko's hair grow back, and it seems those words had been no falsehood.

However.

Serpent-san's very existence had been just myriad lies.

One of the myriad gods—was myriad lies.

‘Uh, ah,aaah!’

Those hundred thousand snakes press Shinobu-san to the floor, and bite at her—their fangs pierce her pale white skin.

‘Guh... Gah...’

The illustrious Shinobu-san gasps in pain.

Oh yes, someone had said back in June—that even on the undead flesh of vampires, poison is effective.

So then is there poison in Nadeko's hair?

Is there poison in Nadeko?

Or is it that Nadeko—is poison?

‘Shinobu!’

Koyomi Onii-chan makes to rescue Shinobu-san—shaking off the snakes, he pulls Shinobu-san out from under them.

And he pushes Shinobu-san, who has become covered in painful looking wounds, into his shadow. He must be using his shadow's shelter as an emergence means for evacuating Shinobu-san.

By being put in there.

The snakes—Nadeko has no means of laying hands on her.

No means of laying hair on her.

She can't bite her anymore.

‘Why...’

Now at last—Nadeko had finished turning.

She's crouching on one knee, and the gravure album has fallen to the floor.

The talisman—has fallen to her guts.

‘Why do you save Shinobu-san—Koyomi Onii-chan?’

‘Sengoku...’

‘*When you didn't save Nadeko!*’

She pulls out one hair.

One snake. Held in her right hand—in an instant, that white snake becomes thick, and then thin—stiff and straight like a rod.

It has itself become like a fang.

A giant fang. A sharp fang.

A poison filled fang.

‘Koyomi Onii-chan—Koyomi Onii-chan, Koyomi Onii-chan—Koyomi Onii-chan—Koyomi Onii

chan, Koyomi Onii-chan, Koyomi Onii-chan—'

While slashing upward with the fang, like an iaido draw—Nadeko yells.

Deliriously.

Reproachfully—she yells.

‘—Despite Nadeko!’

The fang struck hard at Koyomi Onii-chan’s flank.

She could feel the impact’s gross sensation.

‘Despite Nadeko—despite Nadeko!’

But not letting that stop her, Nadeko kept on swinging the giant fang—Koyomi Onii-chan made no effort to avoid it.

Why was it?

Why did he protect—Shinobu-san?

Why? Why?

‘Despite Nadeko also loving Koyomi Onii-chan!’

The tip of the fang—

Bites into Koyomi Onii-chan’s skin.

Nadeko’s poison—her venom.

Courses through the body of her beloved Koyomi Onii-chan.

## 023

—And so the story returns to its outset.

Welcome back.

Did you have fun?

That’s what really counts.

The grounds of North White Snake Shrine—with the shrine sanctuary building now gone, there’s only the torii left to show that it is a shrine. On this shabby mountain path, in the midst of tremendous torrential rain, through which she could see barely an inch ahead of her, Nadeko stands alone.

She’s alone.

Overwhelmingly alone.

The only one standing is Nadeko.

The other two have fallen—Koyomi Onii-chan and Shinobu-san, with their bodies filled to the brim with venom, have turned a dark bruised color—and Koyomi Onii-chan’s shattered heart has not yet regenerated.

Even so, they are undead vampires.

They have their dignity.

It appears they're somehow still living, the two of them having not yet reached death—though describing the undead as being alive is ridiculous enough to be laughable.

And even so—that's only if their reflexive twitching—like the legs of a frog when electric current is applied, which looks perhaps only to be in response to the falling raindrops—can be said to be “living”.

‘If only you hadn't come after Nadeko.’

Nadeko mutters.

As she sweeps the fang about, swish-swoosh, with her left hand.

‘If only you had left Nadeko alone when she ran—if you weren't going to help Nadeko. Or at least Koyomi Onii-chan, if only you had exterminated Nadeko—if only you had killed Nadeko.’

Too weak.

Nadeko herself, looking down on Koyomi Onii-chan with sober eyes, shudders at the coldness of her own words—she thought it might be the fault of the cold rain, but it was not only that.

Nadeko must already.

Have become completely cold-blooded.

Far more so—than Shinobu-san.

Her body, heart, blood and mind must all have cooled.

After her attack had stalled Koyomi Onii-chan, Nadeko had fled from his room—

After running about from place to place, eventually returning here, to the North White Snake Shrine where everything had begun, Nadeko had hid under the floor of the shrine, and Koyomi Onii-chan, as can only be said to have been expected, came after her.

Even with some idea of where to look, she didn't think he could just stumble upon her.

So does that mean, after that, Koyomi Onii-chan had spent all that time searching for Nadeko?

Like on that other evening—he must have done.

Sure, he must have done.

Koyomi Onii-chan—the Koyomi Onii-chan who Nadeko fell in love with, is that sort of person.

That sort of person.

And nothing but that sort of person.

‘He said he'd kill Nadeko... He told Shinobu-san to feed... But of course he wouldn't have intended to kill, nor to let her eat. When he blew away the shrine, he must have been looking to clear things up. Koyomi Onii-chan—is all mouth.’

Perhaps if it were a case of possession, he could have cleared it up.

Says Nadeko.

The coldness of her tone was only increasing.

‘He’s always like that... Koyomi Onii-chan is always like that. Never mind his chances of victory—without even intending to win, just muddling through, he fights for a victory without fighting...’

Koyomi Onii-chan—and Shinobu-san too, are currently only immortal and not actually strong. Noi can that immortality be said to be absolute, especially when faced with something it’s unsuited against, such as a snake’s poison—indeed.

This is how they end up. How “wretched” they were.

‘...So in the end?’

Not taking her eyes off the two of them.

Still staring at them—Nadeko spoke.

There’s no point now in bothering to look at her right wrist.

‘What was this all about? What has been going on? Tell me, Serpent-san—why did it turn out like this?’

‘Like I said, ain’t the upshot, Nadeko-chan, that yer to blame for everything—aaan?’

Serpent-san answers, like always, cynically, in a tone as though picking a fight.

No—like always? That’s a silly thing to say.

Since Serpent-san—this oddity called “Serpent-san”—is the god revived only hours ago, wher Nadeko ate the talisman.

Until now, that oddity hadn’t existed.

Only within Nadeko’s heart, could he have been found.

‘Normally that’d be enough—oddities, and gods, existed only within individuals in the first place anyway, ya see. They’re things inside, not outside. This image ya pushed on me is also enough of a faith.’

‘Faith... Meaning, Nadeko built up an oddity called “Serpent-san” in that image, within Nadeko’s own mind?’

‘And with that, just by yerself, ya revived a faith that fell to ruin long ago. Well, thanks to that, I’ve been lumbered with this weird character as a base... Nah, nah, it really is quite the delusion.’

Delusion. The word pierces her.

‘Delusion... Meaning that Serpent-san, the partner Nadeko thought she had, had really been a hallucination.’

‘Right. Seeing things that weren’t visible, hearing things that weren’t audible. And taking that to be a message, ya thought yerself to have been chosen—now, what’d ya call that sort of thing, Nadeko-chan?’

Aaan?

Said Serpent-san.

It doesn’t need saying.

A pitiable kid.

A cringeworthy kid.

And it's Sengoku Nadeko.

'Delusions of hearing the voice of god... It's rather like fancying oneself to be Jeanne d'Arc.'

That she had known, despite having been at the wrong angle to see inside her shoe compartment, that what she had felt there had been a snake, and also that it had been white, was only natural.

Because it had been a figment of her own imagination.

Of course she would know.

The reason why the white snake only appeared from enclosed spaces, and why it couldn't move from the shrine, was extremely simple—because otherwise the coherence of the delusion would break down.

Enclosed spaces—it was precisely because those nooks and crannies had been unseen, that they allowed an "oddity" to be imagined there.

That they allowed for surprise.

It's rather an account of some stupidity, isn't it?

No, not an account, but a story and—

'Nah, but it did in fact bring about the revival of a god, me, so it ain't no small feat—Sha! Sha! Nadeko-chan. The point is, for the sake of that, ya fabricated a story.'

'Fabricated—a story.'

'Ya ask what were going on—but there weren't anything going on.'

'.....'

'A concoction. Making up a story that were never real, Nadeko-chan span out a big adventure within yer delusions. The real Nadeko-chan just went on living her ordinary, narrativeless life. Yer good at fleeing reality, Nadeko-chan, and I suppose this was yer greatest flight of all.'

'But...'

While knowing all too well that what Serpent-san had said was the absolute truth, Nadeko still speaks in vain resistance.

'If Serpent-san had been Nadeko's delusion until now... how come Serpent-san knew things that Nadeko didn't?'

Serpent-san drawing things out from Nadeko's knowledge—or doing things like reading Nadeko's mind—that could all be explained easily by Serpent-san being Nadeko's delusion. That he used thoroughly ordinary, easily understood analogies would also be part of that. But Serpent-san had known things that Nadeko hadn't—Nadeko shouldn't have had specialist knowledge of oddities—

'Sha! Sha! That ain't possible. I were Nadeko-chan's delusion, so of course I didn't know more than Nadeko-chan did.'

'Th-Then how?'

'Nadeko-chan *has just forgotten*—back in June, when Nadeko-chan had been reading in a bookstore in order to undo the charm on ya, ya took on a fair bit of specialist knowledge. Of course, that were like overnight revision for an exam, so ya clean forgot most of it—but human memory doesn't do

perfect erasure. However much ya intend to forget—it's etched in yer brain. Just as sin will never be forgotten.'

'...Yes.'

In that case, maybe Nadeko was like those remarkable sorts who can re-watch a recording of a sports broadcast over and over and get into it each time. With being able to enjoy a book however often one reads it, it's an economical disposition.

'But why did you know things about Koyomi Onii-chan? Things that Nadeko didn't know, like abou him and Shinobu-san using up the spiritual energy at this shrine—'

'But even that's what Nadeko-chan knew.'

He declared.

Having been told so that firmly, she can't ask again—but then how could that be?

Nadeko ought not to know—something like that.

Who could she have heard it from? Who...

'...Everything's all messed up... But will you tell Nadeko, Serpent-san? What happened, for things to turn out like this?'

She had no interest in returning to the past anymore.

What's done is done.

But she would at least like to know the details—as a responsibility.

As the person responsible. As atonement, perhaps.

At least, as the victimizer.

Certainly she had had enough now—of running from reality.

.....

Nor was there a need to run, anymore.

'It ain't like anything especially happened. It's just that due to yer delusions, Nadeko-chan's memory got all tangled and mixed up—like a big, twisted snake.'

'Enough with the analogies... Since when did Nadeko's perception become mixed up? Tell Nadeko that. You know that much—don't you, Serpent-san?'

Serpent-san now would.

No longer Nadeko's delusion—Serpent-san truly revived, would.

But that's why this conversation might be said to be foolish—since Serpent-san, as he is now, is Nadeko.

Transcending delusion, surpassing possession, they are one.

*Serpent-san, the one who had been sealed in that talisman*—has been revived, manifested in Nadeko, the one who had swallowed it.

Serpent-san.

Is Nadeko.

So from here on is essentially just her talking to herself—as is customary.

‘Did the delusions begin when Nadeko saw the white snake in the shoe rack?’

‘That’s right, but that’s maybe not quite what would be the starting point—if ya want the beginning, for Nadeko-chan it would be the start of the month before last.’

‘The month before last... The start of September?’

The start of September would be...

‘That were when ya found out that Koyomi Onii-chan had a lover—when ya saw Koyomi Onii-chan walking intimately with his girlfriend. That were the “beginning” for Nadeko-chan.’

Nah, the end, I suppose—he says.

The end.

‘Ya tried to be all mature when talking to his little sister—but actually Nadeko-chan broke a little at that moment.’

‘Broke...?’

‘Nah, I ought not to say broke. It’s a pretty normal thing. It’s a natural emotion. Like Nadeko-chan’s friend had done with Nadeko-chan, ya simply became jealous—of that girlfriend.’

‘.....’

Jealousy. Envy.

The other side of tales of great romance—the specter.

So that was it?

So it was then that Nadeko—had been bitten.

By the snake. By the venomous snake.

Bitten into—taken over.

‘And... And what did Nadeko do then?’

‘It’s yerself yer asking about, so what do ya think? Ya simply thought the same thing as yer friend did. Ya get it, don’t ya? Birds of a feather flock together, don’t people say, aaan?’

‘The same thing...?’

Having heard that much, without really having to ask further, however confused her memory was—even having fabricated a story, she could figure it out, but nevertheless had to have it confirmed.

From Serpent-san’s mouth.

She couldn’t not ask—she had to.

She had to.

As it had been for the sake of that, that Nadeko had needed Serpent-san—that she had revived Serpent-san, who had lost his faith, been destroyed, been sealed and had been sleeping peacefully.

Whom she had fabricated.

‘Thought the same thing... Meaning, using a “charm” on her—Koyomi Onii-chan’s girlfriend—to try to “do away with” her?’

‘Nah, nah, having been in that class, Nadeko-chan knew better than anyone how uncertain a “charm” could be—so ya didn’t do that. Well, though yer right that ya tried to have her dead. Good job, yer on the money.’

‘...Well, it’s Nadeko’s own thinking.’

“Course, it ain’t like Nadeko-chan tried to take that girlfriend’s place. It were just that her existence were an obstacle for Nadeko-chan—in the way of carrying on single-mindedly loving Koyomi Onii-chan.”

‘It’s really rather selfish.’

Well, it is her own thinking.

But she speaks of it as though it were someone else’s.

‘Basking in a love that won’t be granted, because falling in love is tiresome... Making the most of his kindness, and then when he gets a girlfriend, becoming jealous.’

‘But maybe the emotion ain’t quite jealousy—well, there ain’t no helping it. It ain’t like ya can go on loving someone who has a lover, and on the other hand, Nadeko-chan weren’t seriously going to go on the attack.’

‘...Right, there was no helping it.’

There had been no helping it—had there?

Perhaps she says that to convince herself.

‘But... If it wasn’t by using a “charm”, what did Nadeko do?’

‘Ya used a method with higher chance of success.’

Serpent-san told her.

‘Which is to say, ya prayed to a god.’

‘...To a god?’

Meaning—to Serpent-san?

‘Ever since ya learned that Koyomi Onii-chan has a girlfriend, Nadeko-chan had been coming to pray at this shrine whenever ya could find the time. Ya don’t remember at all?’

‘...No. So you’re saying Nadeko did a hyakudomairi—a pilgrimage of a hundred visits?’

‘Yeah, though of course ya didn’t come a hundred times.’

‘...But “chance of success”...?’

Would it really—be high? After all...

‘Fair point. Just praying to a god? Ain’t really likely to work. So people would think. Except no Nadeko-chan, right? ’Cause back in June, at this here shrine, Nadeko-chan were cleansed of tha “charm” put on ya by yer friend.’

‘.....’

Meet with an oddity, and to oddities you will be drawn.

Perhaps that’s what that means.

Meaning that, *by learning of oddities, one comes to believe in oddities.*

‘Oh. Nadeko found out then—that prayer can have an effect.’

For that reason—a pilgrimage of a hundred visits.

Although, in fact, it was probably more like fifteen visits.

Given Nadeko’s life schedule, about that many would have been what she could have managed.

‘But it’s quite a feat to manage to forget a thing like that... Was it that it was an unfavorable memory, so it got erased?’

‘Unlike a certain someone, ya ain’t able to do anything so convenient.’

A certain someone? Who would that be?

Serpent-san’s knowledge is no longer the same as Nadeko’s, so she couldn’t tell who that meant.

‘Nadeko-chan were only pretending to have forgotten. And that alone is enough.’

‘.....’

Pretending to have forgotten... Put another way, lying.

Which is to say, she told a lie?

The liar—was Nadeko.

Well, she does tell some lies.

She lies to Koyomi Onii-chan, and to herself.

‘...But even supposing prayer can have an effect... Even supposing that were true, praying “here” ought to be meaningless.’

Since this shrine is—a derelict shrine.

A shrine that has lost its faith. There hadn’t been any god here.

‘Right. *That were pointed out to Nadeko-chan—by a woman called Oshino Ougi.* In the morning that day.’

The morning that day—when she had nearly been hit by a bicycle.

The morning of Tuesday, October 31st.

(Oh yeah, Nadeko-chan, sometimes I just happen to see you, but it seems like you’re going to that shrine quite frequently, and I don’t know what it is you’re praying for—but it’s no good.)

(Didn’t you know? There’s no god at that shrine, you see.)

(As a location it’s still functioning, but it’s no longer a shrine to a god.)

(However much you pray, it’s in vain.)

(Well—it’d be a different matter if the sacred relic were to be returned though.)

(By the way, Araragi-senpai currently has that sacred relic—*Gaen Izuko-san* entrusted it to him. Just a few months ago. I guess it’d be somewhere in his house. Knowing him, he’s probably not made a real effort with where he’s keeping it.)

(It’s a talisman.)

(You could say that the god is *sealed* inside the paper—by the way, the onmyoji who, a thousand

years ago, sealed the god in that talisman, is the same person who made the amulet used when Sengoku-chan was saved by Araragi-senpai. Even just knowing that much, you can tell how valuable and fearsome the talisman is, right?)

(And the greatness of the god.)

(If that god is revived—if the seal is broken, it's sure to be able to quite easily grant Nadeko-chan's wish—no, really.)

(How to break the seal? I don't know about that.)

(What with it being a snake god, maybe if someone made one of the snakes around here swallow the talisman or something—)

‘—Ya also got that distasteful scrunchie that morning, as a “token of friendship” from that high school girl.’

If she had been “held up talking” so long—

No wonder time had seemed to have passed quickly.

‘…And, with that as a trigger, Nadeko began “fabricating a story”…’

The point when she had started seeing the white snakes had been, yes, right after meeting Ougi-san.

‘Atonement for killing snakes… That stuff was no more than just the most plausible excuse for Nadeko. Just a story made up in order to search for the talisman—Serpent-san’s relic, in Koyomi Onii-chan’s room…’

For that, she even took advantage of her own sins.

Delusions. Fabrication. Outright lies.

To have her own selfish wish granted, she had set out to revive a god.

And to revive that god—she fabricated the voice of god.

Seeing illusions—she ignored reality.

With her own made-up story as a decoy—

Behind that, she plotted the reinstatement of a god.

‘…But what about the front door of Koyomi Onii-chan’s house opening from the inside? That’s a supernatural phenomenon that can’t be explained as a hallucination, isn’t it?’

‘In reality ya just used a key.’

She was bluntly told the mundane truth.

‘The day before, why else had ya *purposely* left yer home such that yer parents would notice, so that word of it would reach Tsukihi-chan or Koyomi Onii-chan? It were to get inside the Araragi residence and borrow a key—with that done, the plan were to take yer time searching the house when it’d be empty during the middle of the day. Well, maybe ya could’ve searched that night instead, but there were no guarantee it were in Koyomi Onii-chan’s room and there were no knowing when his sisters might come into the room that night.’

‘…And in fact, Tsukihi-chan did come in.’

But then, having thought that far ahead, in the end she had been found by Koyomi Onii-chan and

Shinobu-san, not just trespassing, but in the very act of theft.

Nadeko probably hasn't the aptitude to be a burglar.

She probably hasn't an aptitude for anything.

The only thing she's apt to do is staring at the ground.

'Nah, nah, Nadeko-chan did manage to revive me, so ya have got an aptitude.'

'An aptitude...? For what?'

'Being a god.'

'.....'

'In all seriousness, Nadeko-chan—yer a god now. Because ya went and revived me, the god who had been sealed in that relic. Now manifested in Nadeko-chan's body.'

'...Nadeko hadn't particularly...'

Nadeko hadn't particularly intended that she herself become a god though...

Despite Ougi-san having told her to make a snake swallow the talisman, as a result of "panicking", she had gone and swallowed it herself, so she's only got herself to blame.

She really doesn't listen to what people say, does Nadeko.

'...Or is this supposed to be some moralistic tale about how your wishes can only be granted by yourself? Don't go relying on gods?'

No, despite having a go at saying that, it doesn't feel remotely true.

She doesn't believe it at all. Nadeko is still caught in her own cooked up delusion.

She's carrying on—pretending to have forgotten.

'Nadeko... has been rather good at conveniently hearing or not hearing what people say, bending the truth and deceiving herself.'

'Everyone's like that.'

'...But it can't be helped, can it?'

It can't be helped, can it? It can't be helped.

'After all—it couldn't be helped.'

'.....'

'Everyone's adorable, to themselves... Nadeko too, being no exception...'

'...Ya act the victim.'

'Ka ka!'

From the direction where Shinobu-san lay—came that faint laugh.

'Victim and victimizer trivially exchange place—'tis merely position and circumstance. Focus on the victimizer or focus on the victim... 'tis all the same—'

'.....'

Wordlessly, Nadeko swung down the fang she held.

This brought some silence.

Although, she did think that was true.

Shinobu-san is right—but whether she's right or wrong, that she's been poisoned and laid low on ground was also reality.

However, the reason why Serpent-san hadn't spoken in front of Shinobu-san was now clear too—in front of a gourmet like her, the fact that he had been a delusion would have been given away.

‘Umm... Was there anything else left unexplained?’

As though one-by-one methodically ticking off what she had left to do—or, put another way, as though dealing with routine business—Nadeko searches for points to clarify.

‘Ah, yes. Why did Koyomi Onii-chan come back home just as Nadeko was searching his room anyway? If it weren't for that—’

If it weren't for that, how was it supposed to have turned out? If it weren't for that?

‘—From the way he talked, it seemed like Koyomi Onii-chan knew everything about what Nadeko was doing, what Nadeko was trying to do and the story Nadeko had fabricated.’

‘Who knows? I haven't a clue. That'd be a matter completely outside the experience of me and Nadeko-chan.’

‘Even if he heard via Tsukihi-chan about Nadeko saying and doing that crazy stuff at school and then leaving early—’

Come to think of it, Nadeko's appalling rampage.

The appearance of Madderko—that had all simply been Nadeko blowing her top.

Not the fault of Serpent-san, nor any oddity.

It was the result of her delusions going out of control.

‘—He shouldn't have known Nadeko had gone to search his room.’

‘Ain't it maybe only coincidence? Maybe he were gonna go off searching for Nadeko-chan once again, but first he went home to prepare for that, and he just happened to run into ya, or something.’

‘Hmm...’

That could just about be enough to satisfy her... The words “just happened to”, had some persuasiveness, she felt.

Just happened to. Hearing them now, those words could even sound pretty good.

‘’Tis... ’Tis a convenient theory. As befits you, child... Though it offers no explanation for why I, a night dweller, would be active during the day—’

Says Shinobu-san, obstinately.

‘Ka ka ka—we have been well had, by that so-called niece... I can at last hear the words of that scrunchie, but it appears all is according to her design...’

‘.....’

Swipe.

With one stroke of the fang, Nadeko silences her.

No, just to make sure, to be careful, she took some more swings.

Hm?

Huh, that's odd. She's still moving.

Better put a stop to that then.

Take this. This. This. This. And this.

She stopped.

She has stopped.

'...Well, never mind. It doesn't matter.'

'Don't it?'

'Not really... It's not like knowing the truth of that would change anything. It just means that Koyomi Onii-chan had his own story going on. Unlike Nadeko, not a story he'd made up... Nothing more. That doesn't mean Nadeko wants to hear the contents of that story.'

'Yer letting it slide.'

'Sure, it can slide, off to wherever. Nadeko doesn't understand why it turned out like this—but in the end, it's not like Nadeko even wanted to know. Sincerely, it doesn't matter.'

With a 'Righto,' Nadeko shifts the facing of her body.

From slightly toward Shinobu-san, over to Koyomi Onii-chan.

'Well, it's time then, to kill Koyomi Onii-chan.'

Thanks to his vampirism, he still appears to be alive, but if he's injected with poison hundreds of times over, even he shouldn't be able to keep his form.

'Aaan? Is that what ya want? Ain't this maybe getting yer objectives mixed up?'

'The objective was mixed up from the beginning—maybe a bit like a snake eating its own tail. Or like the proverb—dragon's head, snake's tail—a disappointing ending.'

'.....'

'...Erm, like, what else is there to do? If he were to live, Koyomi Onii-chan would end up with another girlfriend, wouldn't he? And being heartbroken every time that happens would be tiresome.'

'.....'

So best to put him—further than any hero or idol—absolutely out of anyone's reach.

'Of course his girlfriend, being his girlfriend, will need to disappear... But in terms of carrying on a love that can't ever be granted, wouldn't having Koyomi Onii-chan die be far more "romantic"? And besides anything else, Nadeko doesn't want to be any more of a bother to him.'

'...So, yer on that level of crazy now, are ya?'

Serpent-san said quietly.

'I can't rescue ya. I were cockeyed crazy, and Nadeko-chan were off yer head crazy. Right... There ain't no saving us. Not by anyone.'

‘It can’t be helped.’

Nadeko raises the fang. Her regrown fringe gets in the way of her view—but this is no hindrance at all.

She herself is now that which hinders.

The snake, the truth.

And the oddly other.

‘Nadeko is an oddity—but.’

While holding the fang aloft—while making to strike, with all her strength, deep into his heart—Nadeko says.

“I” say.

‘That’s “Nadeko”, and not “me”—’

The strike—

Never comes, as at that moment, an electronic sound reverberated around the grounds of the shrine. No, because it’s amid the downpour, the noise itself doesn’t resound as such.

Rather, through the paving stones of the shrine’s path.

Nadeko felt—buzzing vibrations.

Like a snake crawling on the ground, she felt those oscillations.

‘Dowsing...’

No, it can’t be that.

Serpent-san has no such dowsing ability—that too was Nadeko’s hallucination. False reading and all, it had been falsified from the very start.

A serious case of phantom ringing syndrome.

Not that she has a mobile phone though.

‘.....’

Nadeko crouched down beside Koyomi Onii-chan—very gradually, but nevertheless recovering, regenerating Koyomi Onii-chan—and from a pocket of his trousers took out a mobile phone—the mobile phone which was vibrating.

She thinks it probably would have some waterproofing, but making an umbrella with her hand to stop it getting wet in the rain anyway, she checks the phone.

She had been inclined to have simply switched it off, but upon seeing the caller name displayed on the screen, she had a change of mind.

A change of mind. Her mood took a turn.

With her index finger, she pushed the button to accept the call, parted her snake hair, and put the phone to her ear.

‘Hello, this is Sengoku Nadeko.’

‘Hello, this is Senjougahara Hitagi.’

It was a very composed, very collected vocal tone.

Thoroughly flat and even.

No—perhaps she ought to call it unaffected.

Calm, as though feeling nothing, as though there were not even an inch of surprise—but that ought not to be possible.

After all, Nadeko had just taken it upon herself to answer Koyomi Onii-chan's phone—there shouldn't be anyone who wouldn't be surprised if the wrong person answered a mobile phone.

But this woman, spoke perfectly calmly.

'Good day to you, Sengoku-san.'

She said.

'Is my man still alive?'

'...For the moment, just barely.'

Cowed by that calmness, she had not been, but Nadeko did answer honestly.

Senjougahara Hitagi.

It's a name she knows—that name.

There was no way she wouldn't know—that name.

That name.

After all, that name is the name of Koyomi Onii-chan's lover—and the person who Nadeko had tried to "do away with" through a "charm".

For these past two months, she may even have thought more about that name than even Koyomi Onii-chan.

There's no way she wouldn't know and no way she could forget it.

'I see. Good. So, just barely in time then.'

It didn't sound as though there were especially any relief in her tone.

However, it was also hard to reconcile—certainly when she had been talking with Koyomi Onii-chan—when Nadeko had caught sight of them—she had seemed a more normal girl.

Could this be a manifestation of anger?

'...Just barely in time? Based on what, do you say so?'

Nadeko asked—since she was of course curious.

'Unless you happen to be in a place you can get to here from within one second, Nadeko doesn't think you can really be said to be in time...'

Said Nadeko, glancing over at Koyomi Onii-chan and Shinobu-san.

'Are you already near?'

'Of course not.'

Senjougahara-san replied, indifferently.

'Right now I'm at home eating potato chips.'

‘...Are you trying to be funny?’

‘I was watching TV while eating potato chips, when I was startled to realize that the kanji for recording [収録] and slave [奴隸] are more alike than you’d think, so I called Araragi-kun to let him know.’

‘.....’

She is trying to be funny.

She couldn’t be attempting to defuse the situation, could she?

Or is this her brand of assurance?

Surely, though, her circumstances don’t allow for displays of assurance...

She really is a curious person.

‘But still, I think I can say I was in time.’

Senjougahara-san brings the subject straight back.

Her deftness was captivating.

‘Why, if it had been after Sengoku-san had done away with my man, then I’d have been compelled to commit murder.’

It was my future that was saved.

Senjougahara-san says, in her utterly changeless tone.

‘Thank you, Sengoku-san. For saving my future.’

‘.....’

‘Well, to be precise, I might have been guilty of assault, wounding, menacing and false imprisonment, resulting in death—Right, I’ll cut straight to the point, Sengoku-san. Let’s make a deal.’

‘A deal?’

‘You can kill me, so why don’t you spare Araragi-kun?’

The way Senjougahara-san said it, it was on the level of “I’ll give you ¥120, so why not go buy me something to drink?”

‘I’ll offer up to you, the future that you saved. And you spare Araragi-kun—and along with him, if she’s still alive, Shinobu-san too.’

‘...What are you saying?’

‘It’s not that some ex-vampire loli girl matters to me, but she’s Araragi-kun’s treasure. If she’s not alive, then there’d be no point having Araragi-kun survive...’

‘That’s not what the question... was about.’

As she spoke, Nadeko tried to work out what Senjougahara-san could be thinking.

But she soon stopped.

It doesn’t really matter.

‘No.’

‘.....’

‘Nadeko’s going to kill Koyomi Onii-chan and kill you. And kill Shinobu-san too. From the beginning that was the plan, so there’s no deal to be made.’

‘...I see. That’s a pity.’

Never mind then, says Senjougahara-san, as if she had, without hesitation, given up.

It was enough to leave Nadeko thrown, but then: ‘In that case, from here on is some advice as your senior in life. Pay attention, please,’ Senjougahara-san continued.

‘You’d best think carefully about the order in which you kill the three of us.’

‘Eh?’

‘You absolutely mustn’t kill Araragi-kun before Shinobu-san—if you do, the link between Shinobu-san and Araragi-kun will break and her original power as a legendary vampire will return. You’d be eaten before you knew it.’

‘...Yes.’

Certainly.

That was some advice to be grateful for—if she hadn’t been told, following her emotions, she had been just about to go and kill Koyomi Onii-chan first.

‘That’s true. Got it—’

‘And before that, you ought to kill me first of all.’

If you don’t.

I’ll kill not just you, but everyone.

Said Senjougahara-san, perfectly naturally.

‘...E-Everyone?’

‘Everyone meaning everyone. Obviously.’

‘.....’

She’s making a terrifying pronouncement.

She’s not even an oddity—she’s just Koyomi Onii-chan’s girlfriend.

‘Don’t underestimate my way of lashing out.’

‘...Fine. Well, then the killing order should start with you—then Shinobu-san and finally Koyomi Onii-chan.’

Thanks, Nadeko says.

If someone offers help, she will at least express thanks.

People who are kind to Nadeko are good people.

‘No need to thank me. In return, Sengoku-san, could you grant me one favor?’

‘Huh?’

Eh?

Now she’s talking like some kind of pushy salesman?

‘Oh, it’s nothing important—seeing how you’re now a god, worthy of reverence, the master of that shrine, why not hear the petition of someone like me, one of your people? I could even make you a monetary offering.’

‘...Nadeko will listen if that will satisfy you.’

Nadeko was interested.

About what Senjougahara-san was going to say, in these circumstances.

About just what someone who could be Koyomi Onii-chan’s lover would ask of Nadeko—about what she would ask of a god.

‘Sengoku-san is free to kill us in that order. But before that, could you give us some time?’

‘Time?’

‘Now that you’re an oddity, so long as you’re believed in, you can go on existing forever, can’t you? In that case, it doesn’t matter if you wait just a little bit—a day for instance, or two days, or a week, or a month... Or six months.’

It was on the mention of six months.

That for the first time, from Senjougahara-san’s words—a strong nuance could be felt.

‘It ought not to really matter, if your intent to kill is genuine. If it’s not an impulse, but the real deal—if it’s not a temporary feeling, but a genuine one, you ought to be able to wait.’

‘...Six months... What’s after six months?’

Nadeko asked in return.

‘The graduation ceremony.’

Senjougahara-san made no attempt to keep it from her.

‘Lately I’ve been working hard to be able to graduate together with Araragi-kun... And if that effort were for nothing, it’d be a shame for Hanekawa-san too.’

‘...Graduation ceremony?’

Not words she had expected. That she would hear such—commonplace words now.

That such normal words could come now.

Graduation ceremony...

When Nadeko could no longer go to school, when she was no longer even human, when her hair had all turned to snakes, even now, when she was about to kill the person she had yearned for—graduation ceremony?

‘Ku...’

Nadeko.

No, “I”, at Senjougahara-san—

‘Ku... Fufu, fufu! Ahaha... Ufufu!’

Just like that.

Just like that, burst out laughing—it was impossible not to laugh.

Even having become an oddity, the gigglebox in her remained—ahh, it's not a desirable trait.

It's really not.

‘Fine... Well, you’ll get your six months.’

‘Why, thank you.’

Senjougahara-san thanks her again.

But, as ever, no emotion could be felt there.

It was almost like talking to speech software—but that in itself could be Senjougahara-san’s natural voice.

The natural voice she uses with Nadeko.

‘Six months... To be precise, it’s until the day of the graduation ceremony. Once the ceremony finishes, you’ll bring yourselves to North White Snake Shrine, please. That’s where Nadeko will be waiting for you.’

‘Eh? Can’t we have an after-party?’

‘No.’

Just what could be going through this woman’s head?

No—Nadeko’s scarcely better, is she?

‘More importantly, those six months are only a “stay of execution”... So meanwhile, Senjougahara-san, don’t hold hands with Koyomi Onii-chan, okay?’

‘Oh my.’

From the other end of the line.

She had a feeling Senjougahara-san smiled slightly.

‘That’s quite the constriction.’

‘.....’

That’s not funny.

And it’s not clever...

But at the same time, Nadeko thought she couldn’t hate her—perhaps if they had had a proper talk.

If they would have spoken to each other—it might not have come to this.

That’s what Nadeko thought.

If she hadn’t envied her just because of her being Koyomi Onii-chan’s girlfriend, hadn’t resented her, hated her—hadn’t tried to kill her.

Hadn’t made that wish—if only she had known.

If only she had known what she was like.

Perhaps things might not have turned out like this.

When she thinks about it, not even once had Nadeko tried to get to know anyone else.

Oh yeah.

That's why—it turned out like this.

‘Maybe if...’

Said Nadeko.

‘Senjougahara-san, perhaps if things had been different—Senjougahara-san and Nadeko could maybe have become friends.’

‘No, I think not.’

Immediately came the denial.

With no ground given.

‘I’m sorry, but I hate cute brats like you even more than I hate my old self, Sengoku Nadeko-san.’

The call ended. Without even a word of parting.

Amid the unfaltering torrential rain, as Nadeko folded the mobile phone shut, she thought of how the sentiment was entirely mutual.

## 024

There is no epilogue.

Nor is there a wrap-up. Things have wrapped already, haven’t they?

Sengoku Nadeko became a god. The end.

Really the story might as well have ended with that line—indeed, for one thing, Nadeko doesn’t have any idea what happened to Class 2-2 after that.

If by some chemistry, as a result of Nadeko’s “address”, it had gone back to being the nice class that it used to be, that would make for a good story, wouldn’t it? But it’s hard to think things would turn out so well and Nadeko can’t go to check, anyway.

She has no desire to fabricate any further.

Her personal prediction would be that things would remain as they had been, with nothing particularly having changed—they could even have worsened, maybe.

No, of course, if the situation has improved, that would be for the best and she really does hope for that.

There, let’s have faith in Sasayabu-sensei’s abilities.

Do your best. Nadeko’s rooting for you, from her heart.

She’s concerned about her father and mother too, but that’s not something Nadeko can do anything about either. Well, a sensitive, delicate, pubescent girl running away from home and not coming back is a common tale in society, so Nadeko prays they’ll let it go as that.

A god, praying.

But all that being said, it would be a courtesy to end the story, like the snakes she had killed, cut abruptly short, so in lieu of an epilogue, why not have a preview segment to tie things up?

### Preview Segment.

Six months from now, one day in March—come to think of it, Nadeko doesn't know the date of Naoetsu Private High School's graduation ceremony, so she ought to find out—in the grounds of North White Snake Shrine, Nadeko sits on the steps of the shrine, her back to the offertory box.

Serpent-san's scrunchie, rather than being on her wrist, is fulfilling a scrunchie's true purpose by being used to tie a hundred thousand snakes into a ponytail—well, since half a year will have passed, it would be nice to have that much of a change in her visual.

By the way, the shrine will have been rebuilt. That's the plan.

That's not Nadeko wishing for that, rather it's been included in plans for the town, so the work should be finished by March—despite having left it alone when it had been in a decrepit state, now that it's come to: "The shrine was completely destroyed in a storm," moves to rebuild it get set afoot, so the world of adults is hard to understand.

Well, if that happens, faith in the shrine may recover a bit, so come March, Nadeko should have gained even more of a power up.

Her ponytail has gathered all her hair, including her fringe, so Nadeko's face can be seen clearly from the front—which is to say also, that she's gazing ahead.

She has no intention of hiding.

Of course, given that she has pit organs, there is, however, no need for Nadeko to look ahead—but today, on this of all days, she must do so.

Because, for Nadeko, this is the day.

The day on which she parts with humans.

And seeing things with eyes—this day will be the last.

...Yessss, at the very least, it would be good to have Nadeko possess that much resolve, when she awaits—them.

Those coming up the stairs at this very moment.

Passing through the torii—those for whom she awaits.

Araragi Koyomi.

Oshino Shinobu.

Senjougahara Hitagi—san, Nadeko has only seen from a distance, so she can't picture her all that well for the preview, but, well, she should appear with Koyomi Onii-chan, keeping close beside him.

While it would be counter to her promise, here it would naturally be desired that they should be holding hands—it wouldn't make for a good picture otherwise.

Oshino Shinobu-san wouldn't be in her little girl form now—rather than go as far as specifying her original form, she might look about the same age as Koyomi Onii-chan.

After what happened last time, she'll know better.

Of course, Koyomi Onii-chan should have correspondingly raised his own degree of vampirism too—well, not that that would mean too much in the face of Nadeko's poison though.

But the difference in his preparedness comes across.

Probably.

And, though this too wasn't what was promised, behind those three, if Kanbaru-san and Hanekawa-san could be there too, wouldn't that be the greatest?

Why, isn't that the full cast?

It's more than a last boss has a right to desire.

But then, even if they all came at her together—Nadeko still wouldn't have the slightest thought of losing.

Nadeko comes leisurely to her feet.

At the same time, countless snakes which had been lurking around the grounds, bare their fangs. They are Nadeko's kin, of one will with Nadeko's.

And then, if the final fight could commence with this line of Nadeko's, it simply couldn't get any better.

'Welcome. Cutest Koyomi Onii-chan, it'll be a pleasure to take care of you.'

And then it's love comedy time.

In many senses, the ultimate battle.

Coming Soon: Judgment Day.

# Afterword

There are parts of books, such as an afterword like this, where what is written is of course down to the author's character; leaving that aside though, when one reads a novel or manga, even if one is not reading the author's direct words, but rather the story itself, it can be the case that one feels something like the "author's convictions". Calling them convictions is a bit grandiose, but what I mean is that in this world there are stories of a sort in which what the author "thinks is right" can be perceived. "What they think is right", "What they think is wrong", "What they like", "What they hate"—not that the author appears in person within the narrative to speak of those, but somehow while one is reading the story, one finds that it can be taken in that way... Well, in fact that's the interpretation of the reader, and whether that interpretation is on the mark or not, short of directly asking the author (or even then?), one cannot tell. But, well, I wonder whether this phenomenon isn't produced *because* they are novels or manga, or at least I think that it's something that occurs more easily in them. Since the author is straightforwardly an "individual". Which means that the ideology won't be mixed, or at least it's harder for it to be. With movies and TV dramas—well, also with things like music, I suppose—the scale of the production becomes greater, meaning that the creators become a plurality, and so the ideologies from their various standpoints will blend together, their individual convictions will be nicely balanced out, and a "work" that stands independent from the nature of a single individual will be created, but with small-scale works, such as novels or manga, things don't seem likely to go that way. Well, there's that, but I'm also minded to think there's an advantage in being able to enjoy "individuality", and I'm fond of that aspect of books, but the times are clearly progressing in a direction which doesn't look for value in individuals, and I have a feeling the real crisis for the world of publishing lies somewhere there. Speaking individually.

Having said all that, this book is a novel about Sengoku Nadeko just being thoroughly cute, where the author's ideology and convictions probably can't especially be felt. If pressed, perhaps it could be said to be a novel that seeks to ask what cuteness is. Well, anyway, it is from this book, that the Second Season of the Monogatari series will at last begin sprinting toward its end. In the next entry, "Onimonogatari", will be the incident of the cram school burning down, which has rather slipped somewhat out of sequence, and then in the final entry, "Koimonogatari", will be the story of their graduation, presumably. Well, I do believe I'm bound to write a Third Season, but when I reflect or punctuating this already long story with a period, my emotions are all the deeper. Elated, one might well say. Everything's just as planned!

So there you have it, this book was a novel written 100% tip-top, "Decoy Story – Rebellionth Arc – Nadeko Medusa".

This is the first color illustration of Nadeko, isn't it? It's splendid. Thank you, VOFAN-san.

Well then, here's hoping for your support for the last two entries.



本作品は、書き下ろしです。

初 出

## 著者紹介

にしおいしん  
**西尾維新**

1981年生まれ。第23回メフィスト賞受賞作『クビキリサイクル』(講談社ノベルス)に始まる『戯言シリーズ』を、2005年に完結。近作に『花物語』(講談社BOX)、『難民探偵』(講談社)、『零崎人識の人間関係(四部作)』(講談社ノベルス)がある。

### Illustration

ヴォーフアン  
**VOFAN**

1980年生まれ。代表作に詩画集『Colorful Dreams』シリーズ(台湾・全力出版)がある。現在台湾版『ファミ通』で表紙を担当。2005年冬『ファウスト Vol.6』(講談社)で日本デビュー。2006年より本作『物語』シリーズのイラストを担当。

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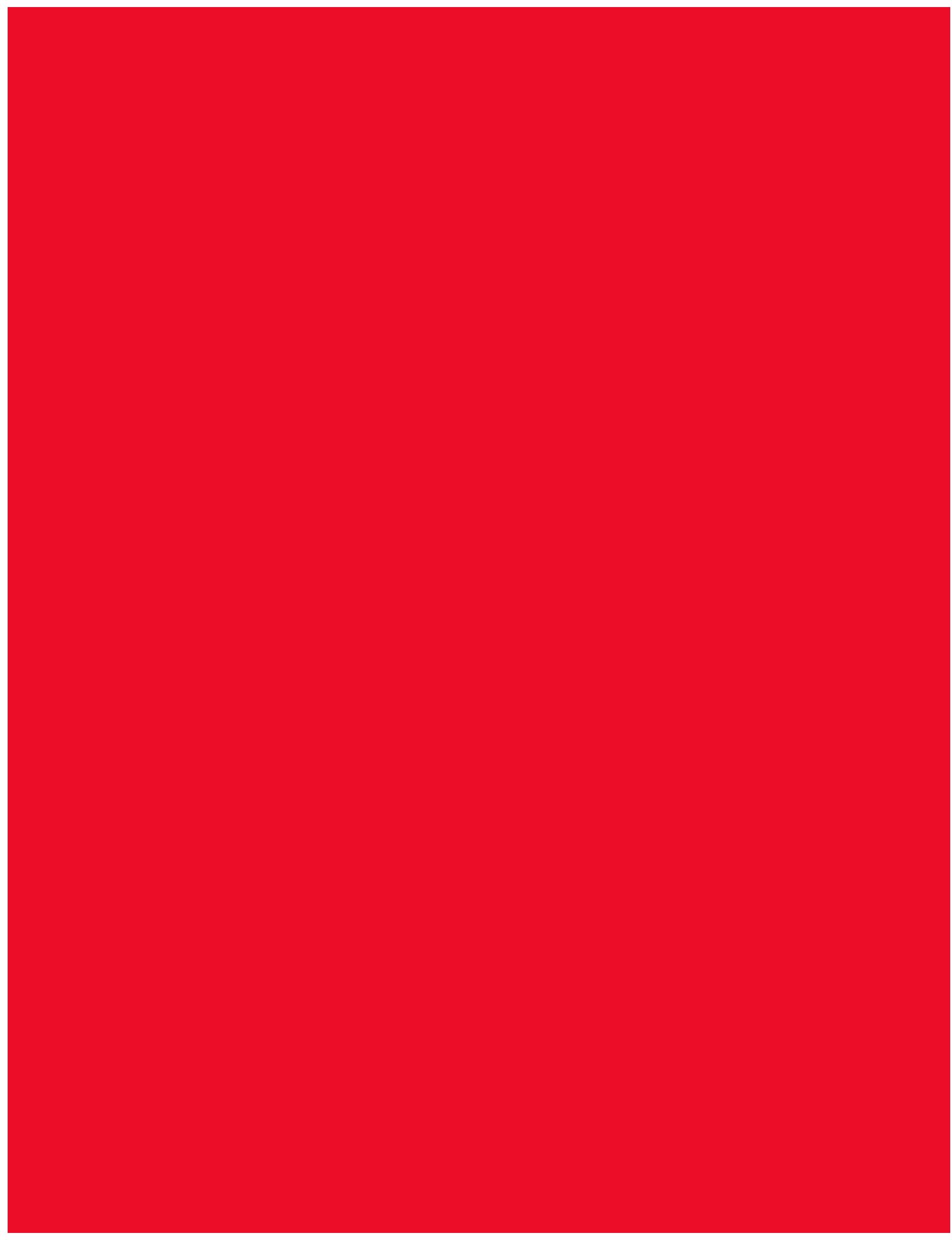
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